# WILDERSMOOR

C. L. ANTROBUS

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VOL. II.

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# WILDERSMOOR

## A Novel

By C. L. ANTROBUS

"Let both grow together until the harvest."—Matt. xiii. 30.

*IN THREE VOLUMES*

VOL. II.

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# WILDERSMOOR.

## CHAPTER XII.

Isabel Rusholme had resolved upon speaking to her sister upon various matters. Accordingly, about the time that Fleming and McKie left Sandhayes, she knocked at her sister's door.

A half-impatient "come in" answered her. Esmé was sitting before the fire, pondering many things. For instance, whether it would not be possible to keep Travis Crosier a meek adorer until she had definitely captured Quentin Fleming,

so that if Quentin did escape, there would still remain the Curate.

Isabel drew a chair up to the other side of the fire, and sat down, putting her feet up on the fender, and surveying her sister with a scrutinizing air.

They were much alike: the same rippleless dark-brown hair, the same smooth complexion—not Frances Aveland's peach-like bloom, but an unchanging colouring that reminded one of the waxen rosiness of the prickly pear. Their heads were small, very small, too small to hold any brains; and, as usual with people possessing these heads, the Rusholme girls regarded their diminutive size as a beauty. For the rest, Isabel's grey eyes had an ordinary straightforward blankness, not Esmé's sinister sidelong glance; her nose was small, and her lips rather coarse; whereas her sister's mouth was a cruel slit, and her nose thin and aquiline. That which in Isabel

was merely good-natured stupidity became in Esmé a sort of low cunning, unperceived by many, but extremely repulsive to the few.

"Why have you come in?" Esmé inquired, after a minute's silence.

Isabel turned back the left cuff of her smart blue dressing-gown, looked with satisfaction at the diamond hoop sparkling on her third finger, and said,

"Well, you do not like advice, but I am going to offer you some, and you had better take it."

Esmé's gaze went back to the fire.

"Is it from George, or from Harry Haslam?" she asked, contemptuously. Her brother George and her sister's betrothed did not stand high in her opinion.

"From neither," said Isabel. "It is from myself. You have been going so often to see Mrs. Holt that I suppose

you are thinking of marrying Quentin Fleming?"

She paused interrogatively.

"You have been discussing this with Harry Haslam," said Esmé, in ominous tones.

"No, I have not; though it would be only natural if I had."

"Mrs. Holt is my friend," pursued Esmé. "I go to see her. I do not desert my friends when they are in trouble."

"I came in to tell you," Isabel went on, "that if you are thinking of Quentin, you had better give up the idea, for Harry is quite certain he will marry Frances Aveland. He was at Sandhayes to-night."

"I know. Mrs. Paton told me. I shall go over to North Rode Vicarage presently—to call there, I mean."

Isabel stared hard at her sister, then at the fire.

"What is the good of that?" she asked.

"You will not be invited to Sandhayes when Quentin is there; you may be sure of that. And if you were, you would not get on well there. You know you would not. Oh, yes," observing the expression of Esmé's face, "I know all you are going to say. But you scheme too much, Esmé. You would do better if you left some things to chance. You tried to prevent Harry and me becoming engaged — you know you did. Well, it was no use; we *are* engaged." Here Isabel took another survey of the diamond hoop, twisting it this way and that. "Anybody but Harry would be offended with you, only he is so good-tempered he does not mind anything now, and is quite ready to be a brother to you."

"I am much obliged to Mr. Haslam," Esmé interrupted.

"You need not be sarcastic," Isabel continued, with stolid serenity. "It will

not make any difference one way or another. We shall soon be married, and you can do as you please when I have left home. I am telling you all this out of kindness. You are only wasting your time over Quentin. Harry is quite certain about Frances Aveland. Of course, it is a pity," judicially, "for I suppose he—Quentin, I mean — will have all Ralph's money as well as his own. But it cannot be helped. I daresay you could have married Ralph. Harry thinks so, though he says he considers you have had a blessed escape, for Ralph was very queer. There were all sorts of tales about him and Jack. He was a deal worse than Jack. They used to gamble, and he won a lot of money from him."

"Jack had none to lose," said Esmé, with contempt.

"Not much, but listen. Jack won it back just before he left, and Ralph would

not pay, so Jack came to Woffendale to try to make him. You recollect Jack coming? It was that very evening that Ralph was murdered."

"I remember Jack coming in to say good-bye, and sneaking off before father got home."

"He did not sneak off — he never sneaks," said Isabel, indignantly. "You are always saying disagreeable things of Jack. He was in a hurry. Harry met him in the road, and Jack told him he had been to old Mr. Fleming's, and to the Works, and nobody knew where Ralph had gone. Harry says Jack seemed in an awful state of mind about the money, and he offered to lend him fifty pounds—Harry is so good-hearted. Jack thanked him, and said it was no good; he must have a clear thousand, or blow his brains out—his own brains," explained Isabel. "Then he asked if Quentin was at home at the Hall, but

Harry did not know. Then Jack went off. Harry thinks he borrowed the money from Quentin."

"Quentin would not pay Ralph's gambling debts, I am sure."

"No, but he might lend it out of pity for Jack. I think he rather liked Jack. Harry believes," here Isabel lowered her voice, "that Jack was in such a fright about the money because he wanted to restore it before he sailed."

"Restore it?" repeated Esmé. "If he had won it back it was his own."

"Don't you see?" impatiently. "He had lost to Ralph and paid him. Then he won it back and Ralph would not pay: for spite, I suppose; or meanness. He had plenty of money. Jack could not openly complain, because there would have been such a fuss about the gambling; which would not have mattered to Ralph, but would have ruined Jack. And he wanted the money

back so badly because," here Isabel lowered her voice again, "it had never been his to lose to Ralph. He had taken it to play with."

"Do you mean he had stolen it from the firm?"

Isabel nodded.

"That is a nice thing for Harry Haslam to say of one of our family," observed Esmé, with cold anger.

"Harry is going to be one of our family, so I do not see why he should not talk about us. George, too, thinks there was something queer about the money, for where did Jack get it to pay Ralph, in the first instance?"

"I daresay he never paid Ralph at all. He would naturally want Ralph to pay him because he was always hard up."

Isabel reflected a moment or two. This was a new view of the situation, and one that might possibly be correct.

"Were the accounts all right at the Marstons'?" asked Esmé.

"Oh, yes, quite right. If Jack did help himself, he managed to put it all back again, with Quentin's help. Esmé, I think you are wrong. I believe he did take the money, for if not, why did he talk of blowing his brains out?"

"He was silly to say that. It arouses suspicion. I never liked Jack, and you see I was right. He never had any principles."

"Neither had Ralph, and yet you liked him, or seemed to," retorted Isabel. "But Ralph was rich, and so he could be as wicked as he pleased without getting into difficulties. I think it was horrid of him to win money from Jack when he knew Jack had only that wretched salary. And you should hear what George says about the way Ralph was living in Driffield!" and Isabel pursed up her lips.

"Jack got as much as he deserved."

"No, I don't think so, and I think father might have found him something to do in

the mill. Then he could have come here in the evenings instead of getting into all sorts of scrapes. George asked father to do so, but he would not."

"I know," composedly. "I told mother to advise father against it, for you were continually talking about Jack, and he would not have been at all a desirable match for you."

Certainly there is something peculiarly irritating about persons of the type of Esmé Rusholme. Their calm assumption that you have thought this and that, have intended so and so, and need to be turned from these imaginary paths by petty underhand household scheming; all this obtuseness of perception and house-spider weaving of dirty webs, is at once intolerable and perfectly hopeless to contend with.

Isabel at first looked astonished, then angry.

"So all this is your doing, Esmé! All

Jack's gambling, and his taking the money, if he did take it, and his going to that unhealthy place—all owing to your ridiculous ideas. As if I had ever thought of Jack!—and I am sure he never thought of me. How could you be so foolish? I hope this will be a warning to you to give up all this planning. Look what you have done. Quentin Fleming knows all about Jack and that money, for, of course, Jack would have to confess everything to Quentin to get helped. How pleasant for us! How angry father would be if he knew that our cousin had gone begging to Wildersmoor for a thousand pounds to save him from prison or suicide. If you had let matters alone, he would have been working here in the mill, not going to Africa at all."

"His going was his own doing."

"Yes, in a way. He went because he could get nothing better in England. Father would have given him a fair salary

if you had not interfered. Well, considering what your managing has led to, you had certainly better give up all idea of marrying Quentin. I should think he has had about enough of us. A thousand pounds is not sixpence, and, of course, he knows well enough that lending to Jack means giving. Besides, if anybody in this house attracted him, he would come. But he is not here more than once a month, and often not that. He is always at Sandhayes. I shall write Jack a long letter. He will be glad to hear all the news, and I think he has been badly used by your scheming and plotting. Good-night."

And Isabel departed to her own room. She did write to Ulyett on the morrow, and being in the first flush of her indignation she told him, not only the news of her own engagement and other Woffendale events that she thought might interest him, but also a plain unvarnished tale of how Esmé had

prevented Mr. Rusholme giving him employment in their own mill, and her reasons.

"Not that I believe it was really Esmé's reason, for, of course, dear Jack, she knew quite well that Harry and I understood each other, and you never thought of me. Perhaps it was just ill-nature. I send you a paper with the account of Ralph Fleming's death. It is a pity Esmé had not married him before he was murdered. She still goes constantly to old Mr. Fleming's, who is very much broken up. Harry says Quentin Fleming is always at Sandhayes. We suppose he is going to marry Frances Aveland. You had better burn this letter, because I am so cross with Esmé I don't know what I have said."

Which letter was perused by Ulyett with great attention and considerable amusement. He laughed as he folded it up. Then his face grew grave. He got up, stretching his

arms, looked seaward through the dusty haze, and said softly,

"God bless them!"

But he did not mean his cousin Isabel and his friend Haslam.

That conversation between the Rusholme girls led to stranger results than either dreamt. For, months later, Esmé wrote Ulyett a letter which would have never been written had Isabel not come into her room that February night, and told her of things she did not know. She had not known of that visit of Ulyett's to Wildersmoor. After her sister had left her, she sat long brooding over it. To neither of them did it occur that Ulyett might be the stranger who crossed the moor with Blind John: they had not heard of his visit to Sandhayes. If he went to see Quentin, of course he would return by train to Woffendale from Wildersmoor.

Esmé pondered deeply over this news of Isabel's, coming at length to the conclusion that the story about the money was true. She also came to another conclusion, entirely erroneous, but natural to one like Esmé; for she had no belief in friendship that was not reasonable. Reasonable friendship meant to lend when you were sure of repayment, either in actual cash or services required. Had Ulyett only needed—say, a hundred; well, there would have been nothing astonishing in Quentin letting him have it. Jack could repay it out of his salary. But a thousand! When, if ever, would Jack be able to return a thousand? Therefore, argued Esmé, what induced Quentin Fleming, a good man of business, to do such a remarkably unbusinesslike thing as to lend a thousand pounds to worthless Jack Ulyett? What motive had he for thus befriending a man so useless; a man with no connections save the

Rusholmes, who kept him at arm's length, speaking of him as "poor Jack"—a man who would never do anything but sink more and more—a man who drifted naturally towards the depths; why had Quentin done this thing? Esmé answered the question herself and smiled as she did so, for Jack would be another weapon in her hand if need be; Jack with his knowledge of what happened that foggy night on Wildersmoor. Quentin had bought his silence. Of this Esmé felt sure; and he must buy hers—at a higher price. How Fate was playing into her hands! Esmé did not say Fate. She said Providence. Esmé was always on the best of terms with Providence—or she thought so. She meant to marry Quentin for his money and position, but she did not put it that way to herself. She would marry him to save him from the consequences of his sin, both here and hereafter. What motive could be

higher? Had her profane cousin Jack been able to see Esmé's careful arrangement of her own mind, he would promptly have offered himself as a more fitting subject for such devotion, his sins being numerous and varied; thus affording scope for different treatment of each, and a greater anxiety as to his final destination. But then Ulyett was a scoffer. Of all men, Esmé disliked her cousin most. He had a trick of reading her thoughts, of seeing through her artifices, that had determined her to keep him as much out of Woffendale as possible. Hence chiefly her successful opposition to her brother's proposal to have him in the mill. Now he should be useful to her. He was in her power. She could make him do as she pleased; use him, if necessary, as a lever to compel Quentin to her will.

Were they not both in her power? She smiled again as she thought this.

Ulyett fancied himself safe. He had restored the money and knew that Fleming would not betray him. Whatever George Rusholme and Harry Haslam might guess, they would not speak: George, because Jack was his cousin; Harry, because he was engaged to marry Isabel. And Fleming fancied himself safe. Ulyett would be silent. He had every possible reason for being silent. The two would keep each other's secrets well. It was their mutual interest so to do. But she, Esmé, knew all—all, and her silence should only be purchased by marriage. Once Quentin understood that, he would not be very likely to risk the grim alternative. If he showed any hesitation—denied the secret she had guessed, why, there was Jack to bring forward—Jack who knew and who could be coerced into taking her part by her knowledge of the stolen money.

Of course, Esmé reflected, it would be optional with Quentin to threaten Jack as she did, but it was hardly probable that he would do so. To ruin Jack would not save himself if she—Esmé—chose to speak. No, Jack was safe enough from Fleming, and she could make him her accomplice. In short, both men were in her power, and she meant to use that power. That Quentin might possibly feel resentment at his future being thus arranged by others did not trouble Esmé in the least. Once married to him, things would go smoothly. She knew him well enough to be sure that he would not visit his resentment upon her, and for his feelings she cared nothing. That such coercion—if it succeeded—would be likely to affect Quentin's character injuriously by sapping his self-respect and disappointing all his hopes, simply never occurred to her. Nor would she have believed this had anyone pointed it

out. To Esmé, things not tangible were non-existent. She was a born scientist; unscrupulous, and blind by reason of that unscrupulousness.

## CHAPTER XIII.

All that night the rain swept from westward. Towards morning the gale subsided, and a thick warm mist brooded over the land till the sun rose. Then the mist rose too, gathering — curling — floating away; catching here and there in the willows—lingering above the pools—melting into the hazy gold of the February sunshine.

It was one of those sudden atmospheric changes not uncommon on the western coast. A rapid thaw, a storm of rain, a quick rise of temperature, and the air is like moist warm velvet; one positively notices the velvety

texture as one breathes. It is scented too —this moist warm velvet; scents of moss and peat and fern pressed out by the sea-mists — fumes of earth and sea that exhilarate as they mount to the brain. One breathes the very substance of the earth—nay, one *is* the earth; a handful of chemicals in the hand of the Creator, "and, lo! from the clod a spirit rises;" from moss and peat, from sea and sky — one lives and moves and has one's being.

Fleming did not go to Woffendale that morning. He wished to see one or two of his tenants on the outlying farms, and who on such a day would walk on stony pavement and listen to rattle of machinery when he could ride over miles of turf and hear the plover's whistle and the rush of the tide? McKie, who had remained the night at the Hall, bemoaned himself as Quentin saw him off at Wildersmoor station.

"It's mornings like this that make a

man feel the hardships of civilization. What wad I not give to be just a barelegged Hieland cateran breasting Ben Nevis!"

But he declined Fleming's invitation to stay and try whether the moor would not do as a substitute for Ben Nevis.

"I'll no deny that maist o' the sick folk wad do just as weel without me, but it wadna pay to let 'em find it out," he observed as he clambered into a third-class carriage. McKie never wasted siller on luxurious travelling; and Quentin, left alone, rode northward across the moor.

To be in sound health, on a good horse, riding over Wildersmoor on a fine spring morning, is to experience a riotous delight in mere existence. "We need pray for no higher heaven than the pure senses can furnish," says Thoreau; and seeing that Christianity is a belief in the resurrection of the body, there is much to be said for this view. It is the soul of a churl that

will not thank God when its earthly garment respires in an atmosphere that suits it, for then simply to go on breathing is a foretaste of Paradise—a return to the wild exhilaration of the Morning of the world, when the Sons of God shouted for joy.

By the time Quentin had reached the first farm he had forgotten all shadows, both that which pursued and that which might meet him. The shadow that pursued? his horse's hoofs beating on the soft mossy turf had left it far behind, lingering by the spot where the blind had found the dead. The shadow—a yet grimmer phantom this—that might meet him, it had vanished, melted into the blue distance. The year was at the spring; and so was Quentin's spirit.

The second farm he visited lay westward, towards North Rode. He meant to ride on to Sandhayes presently. In the country one calls on one's friends at any hour that

may chance to be convenient. No need to wait till afternoon before one can knock at a familiar door. The time was barely eleven, he would be there by twelve, thought Fleming, as he drew rein at the farm gate, where the farmer stood talking to a labourer.

Farmer Blackshaw greeted his landlord after the fashion of Surturbrand—as a free Dane his leader; and proceeded to explain the contention between the man and himself.

"Would yo' believe it?" he said, appealing to Quentin as sure of sympathy. "I sent this chap o'er to Woffendale wi' a cart-load o' this an' that, an' a few sacks o' potatoes, an' he's lossen a sack on th' road. Lossen a sack o' potatoes an' conna tell wheer it fell off nor owt about it!"

"Ay, thot's it. I conna tell owt," acquiesced the culprit; not sulkily nor carelessly, but simply as stating a fact.

Fleming was amused.

"When did you first miss the sack?"

"Eh, sir, not till I wur i' Woffendale market. Then I looked i' th' cart an' th' sack wur gone!"

The farmer eyed his man half-humorously.

"Lad, art tha in love?"

"Nay, I amna," with a sheepish grin.

"Then," said Blackshaw, impressively, "tha mun be a fool!"

Quentin laughed consumedly. In his light-hearted frame of mind the situation appealed to him. He sympathized fully with the farmer's standpoint of thought. A man in love may reasonably be excused even such an error as losing a sack of potatoes; the distracting nature of his meditations pleads for him. But when he cannot urge this excuse, what then is to be said for him? Clearly he is a fool.

Neither did the potato-loser by any means resent the epithet, but, perceiving its

reasonableness, joined in with an appreciative guffaw, and advanced to hold Fleming's horse.

"Oh, never mind! He will follow me," said the latter, dismounting. "I see you are ploughing up there, Blackshaw. You lose no time," glancing towards a near sweep of upland where, dark against the hazy blue of the sky, plough, ploughman, and horses paused a moment at the end of a furrow.

"Oh, ay, it's no good to stond an' whistle, an' theer couldna be a better day for turning o'er the ground. I wur going up theer. Will you coom, too, sir? You was a rare one for ploughing when you was a boy."

"I believe I could drive a tolerably straight furrow now," said Quentin, as he and Blackshaw walked up the narrow path, Fleming's horse following close behind its master like a dog.

There is a singular fascination in this February ploughing: to lean against the old weather-beaten stile and watch the slow, heavy tread of the intelligent brutes as they pace onward; the hiss and gleam of the steel cleaving the earth as a prow the sea; the waves of rich brown earth rising—falling over as the plough passes on, steadied by the labourer, his slow step like that of the Clydesdales, his whole bearing—the slight backward poise of the body as his hard hands grasp the handles—having a sort of clumsy grace, the beauty of perfect harmony.

There is about it all an idea of a good beginning, a sturdy, wholesome foundation for life to come. The horses are strong; the man is strong; the plough is good steel made by strong arms; underneath are the slow waves of the strong clean earth; birds twitter joyfully in the furrows; in the leafless trees the sap is rushing bravely upward;

the clear pale February sky is overhead; the chill sweetness of the February air all round—a good beginning of bread for the life of man. One pauses by the stile and lazily wonders what noble thoughts, what saintly lives yonder brown field will feed. Truly, it may feed thoughts and lives neither noble nor saintly; but, somehow, one does not think of that as the long furrow is driven and turned. The spell woven by the February ploughing is the spell of contentment. All is well—all must be well; since as long as the earth remaineth, seed-time and harvest shall not cease.

Fleming and Blackshaw talked of barns and silos, and watched the rising and falling waves of soft brown earth. The ploughman was a black-haired, strongly-built young fellow, who had often helped Quentin to drive a furrow when it had pleased the young master in his boyhood to try his hand at ploughing—both lads hanging on

to the plough-handles, a handle each. He now halted and pointed out the off horse to Quentin.

"Owd Jenny, sir. You mind her?"

"Of course I do," patting the creature, who turned large soft eyes upon him. "I remember how she used to look round reproachfully at us when we could not hold the plough steady."

Farmer Blackshaw chuckled.

"I reckon Jenny could ha' driven a straighter furrow than either o' you i' those days."

"I have not a doubt about it. Well, Blackshaw, I'll see about those silos."

The field was wide and sloping, with a footpath down the middle. The lower end of the path opened directly on the moor; the upper led through more fields, and thence into a moorland track leading to North Rode. Blackshaw was expressing his thanks, the plough had turned the

furrow, and Quentin was re-mounting, when he caught sight of a figure he knew well standing by the far gate; the cinnamon-brown of her garments so blending with the russet tones of the leafless hedge that, till now, he had not seen her.

"Is that gate locked?" he asked, withdrawing his foot from the stirrup.

"No, sir. You can get through on to th' moor."

Frances held out her hand with a smile as Quentin approached.

"Have you been discussing farming? I saw you and Marigold when you first came up," stroking the horse's velvet muzzle. The creature was following close behind Fleming's shoulder, stepping daintily along the narrow path.

"Did you? I only caught a glimpse of you a moment ago. Your dress is the same colour as the brambles."

"I have been watching the ploughing

and trying to find out why the clank of the slackened chain, as the plough turns and is lifted, is so pleasing to one's ears. It is an idyllic sound. When a railway porter uncouples carriages I do not find the clanking by any means idyllic, though it is the same. Yet there are people who maintain that fact is everything."

"Facts are just what feelings make them; no more—no less," said Quentin. "Nothing is real but ourselves. And everything is beautiful in spring."

Frances glanced at her old playmate and laughed.

"Are not these sentiments of yours similar to those which drew on you Dr. McKie's reproof last night?"

"Dear old boy!—it is not often that I shock him. I am right, though. What causes happiness is good. The sound of ploughing in spring makes us happy. Therefore it is good."

His companion laughed again.

"It is good. But not, I think, for the reason you have given."

"Well, since it is good, what matters the reason? Any reason will do."

The spring was running in Fleming's veins even as in the brown tree-trunks. He was bubbling over with life; his eyes dark and luminous—very little of the grey iris visible; eyes and lips smiling together, his step buoyant. He seemed to radiate vitality — the strong sunny vitality of the awakening earth. This was Quentin as Frances had always known him—Quentin with no shadow on his face: joyous, untroubled, restful. Her own spirits rose under the exhilarating influence of his presence. This, indeed, was the secret of his popularity. People were the happier for seeing him. The light-hearted unspoken warmth of sympathy cheered them. For the moment their life-burdens pressed less heavily. Hitherto life had gone smoothly

with Frances Aveland. She scarcely remembered her mother's death. No sorrow had touched her till the dark shadow of her father's illness loomed before her, an illness with no hope of recovery—a slow wasting. That shadow dimmed the future. When she was alone—it seemed impossible that she should ever be alone; go in and out, do this and that in the silence of solitude, with none to heed or care. Perhaps one more careless would have pondered less and so been happier. But Frances, like her father, was of a grave reflective disposition. She was impelled by nature to look forward, to wonder what was behind the mists of to-morrow.

Through those mists, it is true, the face of her old playmate Quentin often appeared. Yet all was uncertain. Who could tell what might happen? Nina was mistaken as regarded Esmé Rusholme; but Frances knew, though she would not

acknowledge it even to herself, that if by any strange chance Esmé married Quentin, she—Frances Aveland—would probably not remain very long at Sandhayes. For with her father dead, with the Patons possibly removed to a better living, with Wildersmoor Hall closed to her, what would be left to her save the old farmhouse full of memories of happier days?

As regards all this, however, she would not look too closely into her own soul. Too keen scrutiny of oneself is not always wise, and, moreover, not natural to Frances Aveland. Reflective she was, but not introspective. That belongs to shallower natures.

"Why think so much?" continued Quentin, with shining eyes as they walked on through the fields, Marigold stepping gently behind them.

"Because there is so much to think about," she responded. "I am like Hokusai—I wish to get at the bottom of things."

"Hokusai, if I remember rightly, did not expect to get to the bottom of things till he was ninety. Wherefore this haste?"

"Hokusai," said Frances, "died at eighty-nine, so he never got to the bottom of things. Missed it by a year. Perhaps if he had hurried he might have succeeded. I regard his fate as a warning."

"And suppose you succeeded?—what then?"

"Go on to the bottom of more things."

"Oh, there is no time. And if there were it is not worth the time. The Lincolnshire fellow was right; happiness is everything—nothing matters so long as you're happy. To know all things would not make the sunshine brighter, the sky bluer, or the song of the birds sweeter. By the way, they are not singing now, but quarrelling frightfully. I can tell by the sound of their twittering."

"The quarrelling sounds very pretty. I admit that the sunshine would not be brighter nor the sky bluer, but the more one knows the more clearly one perceives the brightness and the blueness."

"You believe that knowledge increases happiness?"

"I am sure that the more women know the happier they are. I cannot speak for men."

"Well, I give it up. Doubtless you are right. But there are times when there seems nothing better than to revert to the original monkey and bask in the sun."

"It appears to me," observed Frances, reflectively, "that men are perpetually wailing to revert to the original monkey. The monkey itself would know better. It would not desire to revert to the original jelly-fish. You possess the treasures of the past ages, all that which only I call knowledge; and yet you cry to sit in a cave

and eat raw mammoth! You have the Pillar of Fire and the Pillar of Cloud; yet you grumble at the desert and sigh for the whips of Egypt."

"The desert is really very rough walking now and then. I wish to linger in the oases. That is all. For instance, here is a pleasant oasis—this sunny morning. Let us enjoy it to the utmost and forget there are any other mornings."

"Yes, it is a pleasant oasis," Frances looked round as she spoke.

There was "a good gigantic smile o'er the brown old earth;" perhaps the little puffs of warm air from the sea were whispering jokes over the tattered brambles and withered fern. Rabbits scuttled gaily about; birds flew, and chirped, and wrangled excitedly; a cloudlet of battered gnats rose and fell by the hedge; through the clear air came the now distant rattle of the plough-chain; close at her ear the

soft tread of Quentin's horse, keeping close behind his master; Quentin himself beside her—truly it is wisest to enjoy the present; who can tell what the mists of to-morrow may conceal? Her forebodings of the future returned. This spring might be her father's last—might also be her last on Wildersmoor.

"Well?" said her companion, inquiringly.

"You are right," resolutely turning her thoughts from that chill future. "And yet I think I am right, too."

"Let us say we are both right. That is a conclusion equally cheerful and correct. We shall tramp over the desert stones all the better for our rest. Also, it may be the vocation of some to live always in a green and shady oasis; tending the palms and keeping the water sweet for the wayfarer. Now that is really a brilliant idea of mine."

"It may be so," she responded, thought-

fully, "but the wayfarers are the most to be honoured."

"They are. Like the Martyrs. Yet the pity of it! I am no believer in the beauty of ugly things. The world is no better because somebody has a toothache. The toothache ought not to exist. In pursuance of which theory, I would sweep out of existence every man who deliberately causes pain to any living thing. He is increasing the sum of the world's misery. It is sheer nonsense to talk of the ennobling effect of misery in any form. Evil it is and evil it must remain. The Church did not live because the Martyrs died, but because what they believed was true. The best men and women have often suffered poverty and wretchedness, but their sufferings did not make them noble; they were noble before that. Their sufferings were simply the outcome of the wrongdoing of others, either directly or indirectly,

and were evil both in origin and results; as all suffering is. I always protest against its being considered beautiful, as I am sure that leads to a sort of tacit approval of evil; people forget how the misery has arisen. For instance, when I was about sixteen, there was a great fuss in North Rode over the compassion shown by a village child to a dog that she had found lying by the roadside with two legs broken and one eye knocked out. She had carried it home, and a travelling bone-setter—by way of ingratiating himself with the people—had bound up the creature's hurts. Everybody said 'How charming!' When I heard of it, I said, 'Who damaged the dog?' Nobody knew. Nobody had thought of inquiring. The compassion of the child was pretty, but the cause was ugly, so that had remained in oblivion. But I sought and discovered the original cause in the village bully—a lad of my own

age—and I administered to him the worst thrashing he ever had, with a promise of two more if I ever caught him damaging any more animals. I intended doubling the punishment each time—a wholesome study in arithmetic. However, he went to sea not long after and was drowned in a storm by a happy mistake of Providence."

"Why 'mistake'?"

"Well, I observe that Providence—or something else—usually preserves the worthless."

Frances turned on him eyes full of smiling amusement.

"Did you not reprove me a few moments ago for desiring to get to the bottom of things? It seems to me you are as much in earnest about it as I, and more practical."

"Did I not confess that you were right?" he replied, laughing too. "I only pleaded for a little rest now and then."

For a few minutes they walked on in silence, that contented silence which is the surest test of companionship. The fields were behind them; the moorland track sloping westward before them to where the windows of the North Rode cottages glittered in the sun, and the little wood that sheltered Sandhayes stood out darkly against the pale sands and shining sea.

"I intended to speak to you yesterday, about a scheme of Mr. Paton's, but I quite forgot," said Frances, presently. "I think I will mention it now lest he should get hold of you first."

"Poor Paton! You know you are hard upon him."

"No, I am not," she protested. "I really like him very much. I am so grateful to him for marrying Nina and bringing her here to North Rode. I only wish to expand his ideas a little, they are very good ideas."

"And this particular idea?"

"Is a village library. He wants you to let him have rent free that empty cottage by the forge. He believes he can raise enough money by subscription to buy books and pay a care-taker."

"And what am I to do?" asked Quentin, as she paused. "Do you wish me to shake my head over the cottage?—or present it to him ready furnished?"

"How meek you are! All that depends, of course, on your own opinion of the scheme. But my objection is that no provision is made for women. That is generally so. Everything is done to save men, and provide them with reasonable amusement, but nothing for women. Then they are blamed when they spend their time in gossiping, or quarrelling, or devouring penny dreadfuls of the most ludicrous kind. Here the girls bring home low-class weekly papers—whole bundles of them—

from Woffendale, and they and their elders hang over them entranced. Now that cottage has three rooms on the ground floor, which would give two reading-rooms, one for women. I do not think a common reading-room would be liked in such a primitive place as this. Of course, the women's room will never be used so much as the men's, because it is seldom possible for a woman to leave her house for hours. But the mere fact of the room being there would lead them to borrow books to read at home. We, father and I, will give some books if there is a women's room; not unless. Nina will tell Mr. Paton so, but it occurred to me that the matter was entirely in your hands. The cottage is needed, so if you make a Women's Reading Room a condition—why, it is done."

"I will do so. Anything else?"

Frances laughed.

"Not at present, thank you."

"May I leave Marigold at Sandhayes while I superintend the cleaning of old Will's cottage."

"I am surprised you think it necessary to ask. Poor old Will!—I have put up a basket with tobacco and a few other things to console him."

"You promised to come and look on."

"And I am coming, as soon as father is ready. He is writing letters."

"Oh, then I will not disturb him. I will take Marigold round to the stables and go straight to the Vicarage, where I expect to find Paton ready with his myrmidons."

"How many myrmidons?"

"I don't know. I told him it would be as well to have several women, so that poor old Will's agony would not be prolonged. It will be a positive circus for the village."

It was.

## CHAPTER XIV.

When, an hour later, Aveland and his daughter strolled up the one straggling street of the village, they found the whole population, including the dogs, clustered round Will Elliot's cottage. It was a little white-washed thatched dwelling, semi-detached, having two windows to the road, and the door at the side opening into a narrow slip of garden surrounded by a white paling, and divided by a path down the middle into flower and kitchen-garden. This slip of ground was well-kept; the flower half jewelled with crocuses,

the prosaic portion having a goodly show of winter greens and a noble onion bed. Old Will's gardening afforded him both amusement and support. He had been a fisherman. Now, in his old age, his wife dead, his two sons drowned, he lived on his small savings, supplemented by the produce of his garden, and by gifts from kindly neighbours and "the better end;" *i.e.*, the gentry.

He was rather a picturesque figure as he sat in his arm-chair in the porch, eyeing his scattered lares and penates. For the furniture had been carried out of the cottage to facilitate cleaning, and was filling the garden path, and overflowing into the road—an amazing assortment of pots, and pans, and kettles, old fishing-nets, planks, torn sails that had weathered many a storm, rickety stools, pails fit for the Danaides, piles of rags that had afforded snug lodgings to generations of mice; in

short, the accumulations of years, for the old man never threw anything away.

"It'll coom in handy," he would say; and, certainly, he contrived uses for much apparently useless rubbish. Did not two dilapidated pails, filled with scarlet geraniums, stand every summer one on each side of the porch, the holes in the pails affording efficient drainage, and the vivid flame of the flowers leading the eye away from their battered receptacles?

To a man of such resources, the compulsory overhauling of his household gods was sacrilege. Marius at Carthage could hardly have worn a more tragic aspect than Will Elliot that sunny morning, notwithstanding Fleming's sympathizing presence, and the reassuring observations of Paton and the interested crowd.

"You will be much more comfortable, Elliot," urged the Vicar, cheerfully.

"Nay, I shanna."

"You will not know your own house," pursued Paton, still more cheerfully.

"Loike enow!" sardonically. "Here!" as a strong-armed woman came out, carrying a pail of dirty water, "wheer art tha taking that to, tha wasteful besom? Teem it to th' cabbages, dost tha hear? If tha mun be slopping soapsuds about, put 'em wheer they'll do some good."

"That is a brilliant idea, Will," and Quentin, taking the pail from the woman's hands, distributed its contents among the cabbages with great dexterity and impartiality. "Now, are there any more soapsuds?"

Another pail appeared, and was similarly disposed of, Elliot looking on with approval.

"I'm obliged to yo', Fleming," he said, addressing Quentin in Border fashion, without any prefix. "If hoo'd ha' done it, hoo'd ha' teemed it smack into th' cabbage hearts, loike as not."

The woman whose knowledge of cabbages was thus aspersed turned upon him.

"Thee ought to be ashamed o' thysen, Will Elliot, a-moithering th' gentry wi' thy soapsuds, an' thy floors, an' thy doments. An owd mon loike thee sitting up to thy ears i' rags an' muck, an' saying as tha loikes it!"

"Capital woman!" said Paton, as she whisked back into the cottage. "Really enjoys cleaning."

Will cocked a resentful eye towards the Vicar.

"O' course hoo enjoys it, Mr. Paton," with a faint emphasis on the "Mr." that Paton did not understand. It meant the boundless scorn of a Borderer for a stranger and a Southron—a man so insignificant that he was compelled to tack on to his name a term of respect, the name itself not being sufficient. "O' course hoo enjoys it! Did yo' ever know a woman as didna enjoy

turning a mon topsy-turvy? Just when he's set in the chimney-corner wi' his feet on th' hearth an' his pipe in's mouth, up cooms a woman wi' a scrubbing-brush, an' it's 'Get out o' that,' hoo says!"

"And he gets out," said Quentin, laughing.

"Ay, to be sure, Fleming. What else should a mon do if he doesna want th' belfry dinging about his ears? Nobbut it's natural enow fur a woman to worrit wi' her own house, an' I never chunnered o'er my missis doing it. What I dunnot hold wi' is other folkses worriting, doctors sniffing an' bawling, parsons a-follerin' 'em loike little dogs, till a chap conna call his skin his own! I wonder every decent mon doesna emigrate, an' leave 'em th' riff-raff as wouldna moind—riff-raff never moinds owt!"

At this point the Avelands came up, followed by a stable-boy carrying a well-

filled basket designed for old Will's consolation. There is none quicker to discern any rare gift of mind or character than the Northerner. Thus it happened that Dr. Aveland, despite his southern birth, was a favourite with Elliot. The old Borderer inquired after Aveland's health with real solicitude, and then unbosomed himself regarding cleanliness generally.

"A-messing an' slopping," he said, "as if theer wurna water enow on Wildersmoor wi'out lugging it indoors! When th' Lord let th' flood loose He told Noah to build the ark so as to keep th' water out. If a mon built an ark i' these days, he'd ha' a round dozen o' doctors an' parsons a-smelling round and a-telling him th' proper way to let th' water in. Eh, I shouldna fret if the flood coom again!"

"A good many people are of your opinion, Elliot."

"I dunnot doubt it. Here's th' parson

talking o' laws fur folks to be clean; but ye know," significantly, "law's law just so long as ye let it be law."

"That is so." Aveland's slow smile rippled up into his sombre eyes. This last observation of Will's was one thoroughly after his own heart.

"Will ye sit, Aveland?" Will hospitably waved a hand towards a kitchen-chair, and the doctor sat down. "I wur about to say theer's a mort o' fools making laws fur their betters."

He paused and looked at Frances talking to Quentin by the gate. Elliot's natural delicacy forbade him to utter the thought in his mind respecting the eminent suitability of a marriage between the two. He contented himself with observing that he was glad to see Miss Frances looking so bonnie.

Then Paton came forward and tried to impress old Will with the advantages of personal cleanliness. In vain.

"Ye know nowt about it, Mr. Paton. Eighty-six last birthday I wur, an' look at me. I con see wi'out glasses, an' hear, an' have neither ache nor pain barrin' lumbago, an' never had. When ye come to be eighty-six I'll warrant yo'll not say as mooch. This waish-waishing 'll be th' ruin o' th' country. Th' chaps as fought th' French wi' Nelson didna waish. They knew better—ay, they did! See th' folks now-a-days! A poor nesh lot. They conna stond this, an' they conna stond that, an' they mun be molly-coddled loike new-born babbies. Ye mean well, parson, but ye hannot th' gift o' seeing."

"How about me, Will?" interposed Quentin. "Washing does not seem to have stunted my growth."

"You're a big chap, Fleming, an' strong. But yo'd ha' been bigger an' stronger if yo'd ha' kept more out o' th' tub. If th' Lord had meant folks to be allus

splashing i' water He'd ha' created 'em mermaids."

"Well," said the Vicar, good-humouredly, "I will go and tell my mermaids to hurry. It is time you were back indoors."

Frances picked up a rug and put it round the old man's shoulders.

"The house will not look very different when all the things are put back," she said. "There is a good fire. Will you go in now?"

But Elliot preferred to stay outside till his household goods were carried within, lest any of them should be taken away as "rubbish." The fishing-nets, the old pails, the rusty anchor, the geranium cuttings in worn-out pans, the ends of rope and broken stools, all were duly carried back by Quentin and the Vicar, aided by the two charwomen and the Avelands' stable-boy. Lastly, Frances arranged the contents of the Sandhayes' basket in the little cupboard

by the fireplace, that served as the old man's pantry, and settled old Will himself comfortably in front of the fire. He was expressing his thanks for the "baccy;"—it would "help to take off th' smell o' th' soap," he said,—when Nina walked in.

"I am sorry I am so late. I intended to have helped to put the cottage in order. However, here is my small contribution."

She unrolled a bundle which proved to be a warm hearthrug.

"This is for your feet, Will."

Elliot looked politely dubious.

"Thank ye kindly, Mrs. Paton, but I loike to speak my moind to th' Vicar, so I conna well take it, being his'n, yo' see."

"Oh, I consider this quite my own," she replied. "My godmother gave it to me when I was married. It is a little shabby now, and Mr. Paton does not like it, but it is still good and warm."

"It's a rare nice un, an' I'll be glad on it,

an' thank ye," said Elliot, with an instant change of manner. The distinction between goods brought into the house by the wife, and those purchased by the husband was always clear to the mind of the northern peasant, though he might choose to ignore it for his own convenience now and then.

The rug was Nina's, therefore Will could take it and yet preserve his independent attitude towards "th' parson." Though in truth the old man did not actively dislike Paton, he merely wished to enter a vigorous protest against the principle of interference which Paton represented in the matter of cleansing the cottage. So the hearthrug, a fluffy crimson one, was laid down over the stone floor in front of the fire, and Elliot's house-friend, a large grey cat, curled herself round on it, with much satisfaction.

"Hoo's a good judge," said Will, pointing to the creature, "an' so am I. What wi' this,"—looking at the rug and

Nina,—"an' th' meats,"—looking at the cupboard and Frances, — "I'll be snug enow."

They left the old man thus mollified. The little crowd that had gathered with so much interest round old Will's abode had broken into scattered groups, commenting upon the scene they had just witnessed. Most of them were of opinion that it was very right and proper; not because they really thought so, but because it is always pleasant to see someone else worried.

Outside the gate Aveland proposed that the Patons should walk back to Sandhayes and lunch there.

"Fleming is coming," he said. "Five is a happy number. Do not reduce it to three."

"I am afraid we must," replied the Vicar, "we have a trick of lingering at your house, and I am due in Riverton early this afternoon."

"But you, Nina," inquired Frances. "Will you not make number four."

Mrs. Paton shook her head.

"Cook is on the war-path," she responded, succinctly. "If you will permit me, I will come in later, when Cyril has gone. However, we will comfort ourselves in a small measure by walking to Sandhayes gates with you."

"I was on the point of proposing that," said Paton, with animation. "I wanted to see you, Fleming, about a scheme of mine for a village library—a very modest scheme. If you refuse it house-room it will never—I fear—get any further. I do not know whether you have heard anything about it?"

"Oh, yes," I have," said Quentin. "You want that cottage next to the smithy, don't you?"

Paton acknowledged that he did, and regarded the cottage in question with a

hopeful look. It was in full view, for they had reached the end of the street.

"That is the one," he said. "It is empty, and is larger than most. I thought if you would be so good as to let us have it —rent free, of course—it would suit the purpose admirably. Perhaps," added the Vicar, tentatively, "you would bestow it permanently, considering the use to which it will be applied?"

Quentin shook his head:

"Not permanently. I am rather fond of keeping things as much as possible in my own hands. But I will let you have it rent free, and will, moreover, fit it up as a library, on condition that there is a Women's Reading-room. In fact, I will arrange it so, fitting up two reading-rooms. Do you agree?"

"Oh, certainly. You are most generous."

Paton looked rather surprised as he spoke. He was evidently wondering what

had put the idea into Quentin's head. It is so unusual for a man to think of women's needs, that when he does so his fellow-men marvel, well knowing they themselves would not. Nina and Aveland both understood perfectly. A gleam of amusement shone in Nina's eyes—a gleam of content in Aveland's.

"Most generous," repeated the Vicar. "I feared the fittings would be rather a heavy expense, and in a parish like this one cannot hope to obtain any considerable sum. And there are the books to buy."

"Well," said Aveland, "do not try to fill your readers' heads with a smattering of useless ephemeral learning, that will give them no subject for thought, but merely cause for wrangling. The people here are a fine race, with plenty of imagination. Cultivate that. Give them heroic figures to contemplate, and noble thoughts to float in their minds. That is education. Nothing

else is. And in pursuance of this my belief, I will give you Shakespeare, and twenty novels—chiefly historical. It is the fashion to decry that sort of thing on the plea of inaccuracy, but most serious histories seem to me quite as inaccurate and considerably duller."

"And what does it matter anyway?" said Quentin, cheerfully. "Nobody wants to be at school all his life. Let us walk in Arcadia, or Arden, and converse with Touchstone. We shall be infinitely more agreeable companions than if we pored over dry facts till old age, like Faust. Moral: see how Faust ended!"

Three of his hearers laughed and agreed with him. The Vicar pondered a moment, then smiled, and said, "There is a great deal in your view. I myself think the wish to hear a story is natural to all mankind."

"I am sure of it," said Nina. "Mr. Fleming is right. Faust lost his soul

through not reading fiction. He wasted his life over what he fancied were the only important facts, and then suddenly awoke to the knowledge that there were a good many other facts much more important. And, knowing nothing of the relative value of things, he sold his soul to be the cheap hero of a penny dreadful—the villain of a Surrey melodrama. Poetic fiction would have given him higher ideals."

"People who are always searching in the valley of dry bones are certainly very awful," Frances observed. "Last year father and I stayed at a friend's house with a man of that sort. Historical dry bones were his specialty, and I could not have believed that history could be so stupid as that man made it. He was like a phonograph. You turned him on and he ground out just what you expected. He never uttered anything original. How could he? He had had no time to think. All that he

knew was put into him, and he simply rolled it out mechanically when wanted. He was positively inhuman. Mr. Paton, I will give the library the principal works of ten modern women authors; and also three of Clark Russell's sea stories, as I believe this sea-going population will appreciate them as I do. I think that in the 'Death Ship' we have the finest conception of the 'Flying Dutchman'—a real human Vanderdecken; with his tender thoughts of his wife and children, his pathetic oblivion of time, his frightful temper, his reckless cruelty. Then the weird old ship—the dull, terrible crew, who ought to be dead men but are not."

"There are a good many of Vanderdecken's crew to be met with up and down the world," commented Aveland, dryly.

"On stormy days," continued Frances, "when the sea is rushing over the sandhills, I often picture the 'Braave' sweeping on with her sails shining in the sun, like yellow satin

—so old they are. Or at night, with the phosphorescence creeping like glow-worms about her worn timbers."

Paton looked his surprise.

"I have not read the book. I must do so. But I should not have thought sea stories particularly attractive to ladies."

"Now, my dear Cyril," cried his wife, "how can you or any man possibly know what attracts this or that woman? I don't know why we should be supposed to delight in the twaddle and sugar-candy literature so anxiously recommended to us by you men. It is affliction enough to mend stockings at all, without reading how the lovely Lavinia not only mended the family socks, but also those of the pew-opener, the bachelor churchwarden, and the village agitator; even though the last-mentioned was at that moment advocating the nationalization of glebe land, and a free hand with respect

to other people's larders. Neither do I understand why, if one scoffs at this sort of thing, one is expected to apply oneself either to mathematics or blasphemy as the sole alternative. One may have a natural affinity for something which is neither twaddle, nor mathematics, nor blasphemy. Now my particular delight is in wild adventure, not at sea, but on land. Plenty of fighting and tumbling over precipices. I had a quiet home and needed something more stirring. So I found it in a top garret and Mayne Reid, and wished myself on the banks of the Rio Grande."

"Mrs. Paton, that is not sentimental."

"It is not, Dr. Aveland. I was never sentimental. That all women are sentimental is another masculine delusion."

"Not my delusion," said Aveland, with his own peculiar air of suppressed entertainment mingled with profound melancholy.

They had reached Sandhayes now, and were standing by the gate, between the clipped yews.

"It is to be hoped," said Quentin, "that the flood of knowledge about to be let loose in North Rode will not lead to breaches of the peace. Not long ago two of our fellows at the Works read a life of William Wallace, and argued so hotly as to whether we were justified in hanging him, that ordinary human language failed, and they took to the only true Volapuk—blows. Finally, one student of Scottish history was carried to the hospital and the other marched off to the police station."

"Is that really true," asked Paton, incredulously.

"Really. It happened last autumn."

This mention of the Works put another idea into the Vicar's head.

"Do you think your uncle would assist

us? Of course North Rode is not Woffendale, but as his son ——" Here it occurred to the speaker that Ralph Fleming's mysterious death on Wildersmoor was not exactly calculated to endear the locality to his father.

"I mean," hastily changing the sentence, "that possibly as a sort of memorial, you know——?"

"I will ask him. I am dining with him to-night."

A slight shadow passed over Fleming's face as he spoke. Nina noticed it.

"Now that we have quite settled the affairs of the village, let us depart, Cyril. Dr. Aveland will be thankful to get rid of us, for his lunch must be ready. I suppose newspapers will be allowed at the library?—a pity. Who was the man who said if it had not been for newspapers he might have known something? Doing good is very wearisome. Nowadays one is so worried

about it, that one longs to set sail for some blessed spot—if such exists—where there are no politics, no proletariat, no public meetings."

## CHAPTER XV.

When Quentin entered his uncle's drawing-room in Woffendale that evening — a drawing-room in which the upholsterer had done everything and the inhabitants nothing —he found Esmé Rusholme sitting there alone. She was wearing a simple grey frock with black ornaments; a frock that would harmonize with the mourning of her hostess, and convey a delicate sense of sympathy with the family grief. Quentin noticed the gown, and fancied it might be truly worn for Ralph. Certainly Ralph had behaved extremely ill to their old playmate.

His attentions to Esmé had been very marked, and then—had dropped. Perhaps she had been fond of him? And thinking of all this, Quentin's manner, as he greeted her, had a softened gentleness that struck her with surprise. "What did it mean?" she wondered. He was always friendly and brotherly, but this was new. Was he afraid that her cousin, Jack Ulyett, might write to her?—might make damaging admissions? Well, if Quentin thought this, so much the better, and it was with great inward cheerfulness that Esmé opened the attack.

"Mrs. Holt is talking to a poor woman in the library," she said, in answer to his inquiries, "and I think Mr. Fleming is dressing. It is a long time since we have seen you, Quentin."

People brought up in the same neighbourhood generally address each other by their Christian names, and Esmé was

careful to keep up this custom of bygone childhood.

"Surely it is not very long," he said; "but so much has happened since, that perhaps the time seems longer. I am sorry, Esmé."

He intended to convey his regret and sympathy for all the annoyances she might have experienced through his cousin. His listener took it merely as a nervous apology.

"We shall be pleased to see you at any time. We are your old friends —your best friends. I should have thought that every consideration would have led you to us, Quentin. But I hear you are taking Ralph's place at Sandhayes."

Fleming's face darkened.

"Ralph was never welcome at Sandhayes," he said, briefly.

"And you are?—is that it? Am I to

conclude you are engaged to Frances Aveland ?"

"No, I am not." There was a lingering in the tones of his voice that Esmé noted with the cold, inward displeasure which was her form of anger. He added, after a moment's pause—

"Yet I hope I am welcome."

He was more obstinate than she had expected. He must be made to see that silence is not freely given ; a price must be paid for every good thing in this world.

"It is natural that Dr. Aveland should wish his daughter to marry well. Though poor Ralph is gone, you remain."

Quentin glanced at her in astonished anger. There is something peculiarly irritating in the deliberate repetition of a statement one has just contradicted. He reflected, however, that Esmé could hardly be expected to be just to the Avelands

considering Ralph's behaviour. He concluded she was still jealous of Frances, and responded with grave gentleness.

"We will not discuss Sandhayes, Esmé. We shall never agree."

"I do not wish to discuss the Sandhayes people. They do not interest me. I merely wish to point out to you, Quentin, that it is not wise to seek out comparative strangers in preference to old friends who can be trusted—like Jack."

Quentin had been tugging his moustache and studying the pattern of the carpet. The significance of her tone struck him with fresh surprise, and he looked up, wondering why she should so suddenly drag Ulyett into the conversation, particularly as she and her cousin had never agreed.

"Dear old Jack!" he said. "Have you heard from him?"

The remark was innocent enough; it was made simply because Esmé seemed

to expect a reply. She imagined it to be a veiled question—an attempt to ascertain how much she knew.

"I can keep your secret — yours and Jack's."

Fleming thought she was alluding to the money he had lent Ulyett, and was puzzled and slightly annoyed to find the matter known. He was wishing devoutly that either old Elkanah would finish his toilet, or Mrs. Holt her interview with her protegée, when Esmé sent an arrow home by adding still more significantly—

"You are safe with me. We are old playmates, and an old playmate will be silent and extend forgiveness where strangers" — with an emphasis on the word—"would shrink away."

She watched him closely as she said this, but Quentin gave no sign that there was any serious meaning in her words. If she had expected him to be startled, or

in any way disturbed, then was she utterly mistaken. The strong hand pulling his moustache was steady as ever, the bronzed skin neither pale nor flushed, his eyes—well, she could not see his eyes. He was sitting in a low chair, leaning forward with an elbow on his knee, and apparently still studying the sombre colours of the carpet. Her words were vague, they might mean much—or nothing. What he would have replied he himself never knew, for while he deliberated the door opened and Mrs. Holt entered, attired in crape and Christian resignation. Behind her came Elkanah Fleming, and following him, the announcement of dinner.

"You see, Quentin," said his uncle, "we know better than to invite you to spend the evening with two old fogies."

Which remark was not agreeable to Mrs. Holt.

"I am sure, Elkanah," she observed, frigidly, "your nephew is always quite as willing to come when we are by ourselves. But recently, since poor Ralph's loss, I have felt great comfort in Esmé's society."

"And I am so glad to be of any use, dear Mrs. Holt," murmured Esmé, slipping modestly into her chair, opposite Quentin.

"That's right," rejoined Elkanah. "It is something for us to have youth in the house now and then." He sighed and frowned; then added, "Not but what Quentin comes often enough. I'm not finding fault. Still, Maria, it stands to reason that we are not much company for him."

"Happily Mrs. Holt does not believe that," said Quentin, "or I should be in well-deserved disgrace."

"I never believe any of my brother-in-law's jokes," she replied with a severe air and a softened tone: the air being for

the elder, the tone for the younger — Fleming.

Elkanah snorted, then turned to his nephew.

"You're a regular hermit, lad, in that old place by yourself. Not but what I like the old Hall well enough, if it could be picked up and set down in a cheerful neighbourhood instead of on that God-forgotten moor." And the old man's hand shook slightly as he lifted his glass.

Quentin said nothing. Usually he was an enthusiastic defender of his native moorland, now he sat silent. What could he say? It was surely natural that the old man should thus speak of the place where his son had died. But was Wildersmoor God-forgotten?—the wide undulating land with the breath of the sea stealing over it. It was easier to picture the Lord God walking there in the cool of the day than in the stifling clamorous streets of

Woffendale; where the hot black smoke obscured His heaven, so that men saw never the blue consoling depths nor the glitter of Orion's sword; and when there is neither hope nor fear, what is left but to wallow?

"The Hall is certainly dreary for a solitary person."

Mrs. Holt said this with a prim little smile. She had expected Esmé and Ralph to marry, and it was entirely in accordance with Mrs. Holt's ideas of what was becoming that Esmé should — on Ralph's death—transfer her affections to his cousin. "A truly modest girl," Mrs. Holt had once been heard to say, "has no preferences. It is proper to seek a husband, but most improper to wish for any particular one." In her eyes all enthusiasm was the result of neglected education combined with original sin. Like the Yankee captain, she believed in sitting upon the

safety-valve. If an explosion blew the vessel into the air, she was ready to blame the Divine Builder for faulty construction rather than her own fashion of managing it.

She was of opinion that Quentin needed a wife like Esmé. She would clip his fancies and enthusiasms as the gardener clipped any straggling twigs of the Sandhayes yews. Mrs. Holt had some faint unacknowledged regret that there was not more to clip about him. Ralph had interested her deeply, because he presented such a fine field for religious effort. There was scarcely anything on the two Tables of Stone that could not be hurled at him with the certainty of hitting; and the tolerably frequent presence of such a hardened and impenitent sinner had given a real zest to the family prayers, at which Mrs. Holt presided every morning.

Now Ralph was gone, and with him had vanished that war-dance of the seven deadly

—six rather, for avarice had not been one of Ralph Fleming's vices—which had wheeled and flickered, advanced and retreated before Mrs. Holt's scandalized eyes for the last seven or eight years; and she missed the excitement of the perpetual conflicts between Ralph and his attendant devils on the one hand, and his father and herself on the other.

Therefore she turned to the only amusement just then available—the arrangement of Quentin's future. She approved of the idea all the more because she vaguely felt Esmé Rusholme was not the sort of woman he would choose if left to himself. Men did not know what was good for them, but with proper management they could generally be induced to marry the right person. She would assist Esmé to the utmost of her power. Little did Mrs. Holt imagine what small need that young woman had of assistance—what a weapon she held in re-

serve. The duel was a more deadly one than could enter the extremely circumscribed imagination of Elkanah Fleming's sister-in-law. She did not believe in dramatic situations. Tragedies might occur on the stage, or in books—two things for which she felt supreme contempt—but in real life there were no high lights nor deep shadows; in fact, they were not exactly respectable. Provided you had a well-regulated mind, nothing particular could possibly happen to you. Mrs. Holt's statement that Wildersmoor Hall was dreary for a solitary man passed without comment, but it gave Esmé an opportunity for ascertaining Fleming's movements that day.

"Have you come from the Hall just now, Quentin?"

"Yes. I've been riding about the moor all day."

And by the look of contentment that

passed across his face, she knew he had ridden to Sandhayes.

"Been to see Aveland?" asked Elkanah. "Oh—ah—you were going there last night. Is he better?"

The question surprised Quentin. His uncle and Dr. Aveland had met now and then at Wildersmoor, but as the latter's health prevented him going out elsewhere, the two had seen little of each other. Then Elkanah had been considerably ruffled by the decisive note found in his son's pocket, so that his inquiring in tones of friendly interest about Aveland's health was wholly unexpected amiability, and Quentin wondered as he replied:

"He appears to me much as usual, but McKie says he is no better; in fact, thinks him getting worse."

"I should have supposed Dr. Aveland would have resided in the south, as he belongs to that part."

Mrs. Holt spoke as though the Avelands did her a personal injury by living at Sandhayes.

"Well, I suppose he knows his own business best," said Elkanah. "The air is mild—I daresay it suits him, and the old farmhouse is snug enough."

"The Patons were there," Quentin continued. "He is getting up a village library. Any contributions gratefully accepted."

"Mr. Paton was talking to me about it at Riverton," said Esmé. "I think he wished me to ask you to assist him."

This was a tolerably solid assumption of proprietorship on Esmé's part.

"Did he? He has summoned up enough courage to ask me himself."

"Never knew a parson too shy to beg," growled Elkanah. "How much?"

"He did not want cash, but a cottage."

"You didn't give it to him outright, I hope?"

"No. Only permission to use it rent free."

Elkanah nodded approval.

"That's right. Always keep things in your own hands. Nowadays it does not do to give to the Church when there's a chance of seeing the Pope in the pulpit one day and an infidel dog the next!"

Mrs. Holt interposed.

"Really, Elkanah, your language is unduly violent."

"So are the opinions of the rascals I have mentioned," he retorted. "I and my forefathers, Maria, have always been good Churchmen, and I'll be hanged if there'll be a Church for Churchmen to go to soon! Well, Quentin, I don't mind giving the parson a twenty pound note to buy some books with. I once intended to give Woffendale a free library at my death, but now that they have started one on the rates, not a penny shall they ever get from me. Perhaps I will

do more for this North Rode one by-and-by."

"Paton will whoop for joy at the sight of twenty pounds," said Quentin. "Now, Mrs. Holt, will you too join the happy band of helpers?"

Mrs. Holt's air was judicial.

"As North Rode is quite another parish, I think I must decline to assist the undertaking, though it has my sincere sympathy. If you will invite us to tea some day, Quentin," with a prim smile, and indicating Esmé by a sideway nod, "we might drive over from Wildersmoor and look at the cottage you are lending."

Mrs. Holt felt this was really a brilliant stroke of diplomacy on behalf of her favourite.

"That will be delightful, dear Mrs. Holt."

Esmé's eyes were downcast, but the lashes were raised an instant to see how

Quentin took this proposal, and he caught the look. These furtive glances of Esmé's always had a repellent effect upon him; they conveyed a suggestion of treachery, which came now to his mind with double force as he recalled the conversation before dinner. For this reason Mrs. Holt's sudden freak annoyed him. He was not desirous of placing Esmé so conspicuously as regarded his home and belongings. There was a perceptible second before he replied.

"The Hall and everything therein is entirely at your disposal at any time, Mrs. Holt, whether I am at home or not."

It was not the kind of response expected. Mrs. Holt, whose obtuseness was of that amazing quality possessed only by rigid Puritans and distinguished scientists, merely supposed Quentin did not perceive the happiness intended for him. Old Elkanah, looking at his nephew from under his bushy eyebrows, came nearer perception of the truth; Esmé,

by the light of cold jealousy and vindictive hate, saw and comprehended perfectly. Her thin lips tightened as she mentally resolved to deal him an extra stab for that speech.

"You should give an entertainment, lad," said his uncle. "People expect it from a young fellow with a big house, something smart."

"So I will. But of what sort? No use venturing on a garden party till June, and even then I should put up a tent ready for the rain that is certain to arrive with the guests. I don't know that common humanity would not also compel me to add hot-water pipes."

"I do not consider this climate so very bad," this from Esmé, in a slightly hard tone.

"Well, Woffendale has no climate whatever. Its atmosphere—winter and summer—is simply that of a roofed-in railway station open at both ends. Occasionally a

breeze blows in at one or the other end and stirs up the smoke a little. As for the air of Wildersmoor, it is mild, and I like it; but its best friend could not call it dry."

"Why not try something musical, say a concert. There are good choirs in Woffendale to be had."

"A good idea. I will think of it."

"Very nice, I am sure," said Mrs. Holt, "but I hope, Quentin, you will have really good music; an oratorio, for instance. However, that will be by-and-by. Suppose we now fix a day for driving over to see this library cottage."

Whereupon Quentin perceived there was no crawling out of that excursion.

"Any day will suit me," he replied.

Then glancing at his uncle, invited him also.

The old man shook his head.

"Thank you, lad, but I'll not come. You give the parson that twenty pound note

from me, and he'll like it a deal better than my company."

Here Mrs. Holt, after consulting Esmé, announced that that day week would be most convenient for their visit to North Rode.

"And we must settle about the entertainment when you join us," she added, rising and rustling away, followed by Esmé.

## CHAPTER XVI.

"MARIA is settling your affairs for you!" remarked Elkanah, as his nephew closed the door. "Now the women are gone I want to speak to you about a letter I've had. You recollect that note from the girl Darlow, found in poor Ralph's pocket? Well, she writes to me, hinting she could supply information which might be of use. Of course, she asks for money. Here's the letter."

Quentin took the crumpled, ill-written epistle, read it slowly, and laid it down.

"It is very vague," he said. "What do you propose to do?"

"I have sent the money," in a slightly apologetic tone.

"Have you?" Quentin was genuinely surprised.

"You see I am getting old and shaky. I can't afford to lose any time. If I die before Ralph's murderer is found, he never will be found. I don't blame you, lad; you can't be expected to feel in this matter as I do. I know that after my death time will drift on, and the murder will become merely another 'mysterious case,' and will gradually be forgotten. Therefore I must leave no chance untried. I have sent the sum the woman asks for, and have told her I wish for a personal interview."

Quentin took up the letter.

"She does not say that she is coming home."

"No, but she probably will, in the hope of getting more out of me. Her grandmother lives in one of those cottages by

you, doesn't she? I recollect McKie telling me so. I think I'll come over and see her."

"Very well. I am sure, however, that Granny Darlow knows nothing."

"She will know whether her granddaughter is returning or not. Don't tell her I am coming. I will take the old woman by surprise."

It was not possible for any created being to take Granny Darlow by surprise, but neither man knew this. Elkanah Fleming, despite his nephew's assurance of Granny's ignorance, fancied he had struck on what might prove a fresh and reliable clue to the identity of the stranger who had crossed Wildersmoor so fatally. Over this thought he brooded for some minutes with grim satisfaction. During those minutes Quentin, too, sat silent, pondering painfully. Did Granny—did Rossela—know that Ulyett was on the moor that night? How did

they know? Had Granny seen him? Well, Ulyett was safe in Africa, his voice was not likely to fall on Blind John's ears. Quentin hated himself as he thought this. But Elkanah's suspicions fairly roused, it was open to him to obtain the young man's recall—the Flemings had interest with the firm that employed Ulyett—and if sent for he would return to England unconscious of there being any charge against him. Here Quentin's imagination began to work. He pictured the consequences of Ulyett being publicly accused of Ralph Fleming's murder. What would Frances Aveland say? What would she do? Would there be anything left to live for supposing that life were left? Or would the careless handling of an unloaded gun prove the best ending to the play?

What was Esmé Rusholme's half-hinted knowledge? He began to feel the jar and fret from which the moorland spring beauty

had freed him. All these intangible coils were falling round him like the gossamer threads in the fairy tale, ghostly—filmy—so impalpable—scarcely visible, save when the light fell here and there on the filaments. Would they float away—vanish? Or would they—as in the story—suddenly strengthen, close—change to bonds of steel that crushed out breath and life? He looked at his uncle. Elkanah was leaning back in his chair, gazing fixedly before him, his fingers grasping a wine-glass. Suppose fate granted the old man's wish and hanged Ralph's murderer? How many of our wishes would gratify us, if we had them? It is always the thing we have not that seems so fair—the sparkling water that flows away from our thirsty lips, the brilliant fruit that the wind tosses beyond our reach. The revenge that seemed fair in Elkanah Fleming's eyes was Dead Sea apples, indeed!

He roused himself and said:

"Did you speak, lad?"

"No, but I will do whatever you wish in this matter."

Quentin said this remorsefully. There was a growing feebleness about his uncle that was becoming more perceptible week by week.

"Yes, yes, I know you will. You don't seem to get on very well with Esmé Rusholme? Maria has an idea you would suit each other."

"Mrs. Holt is mistaken. I do not think either of us would agree with her."

"I don't know about that. Miss Esmé seems to take a good deal of interest in our family, judging by the way she comes to see Maria. No young woman in her senses would pester herself with Maria unless she had her eye on one of the men belonging to her. Ralph is dead, and I am too old, so it must be you."

Quentin laughed.

"Quite a mistake. I don't think I am a favourite with Esmé."

"Nor she with you? Well, that's your business, of course. I only wished to know if you were going to marry her. I suppose Ralph was the man then, as it isn't you."

"Surely we may allow her to come and see Mrs. Holt without any other thought?"

"Pooh! Maria's fool enough to think that. I know better. It must have been Ralph. He used to go to the Rusholmes' a good deal. Was friendly with that scamp of a cousin of theirs—Ulyett, who has gone to the West Coast. Best place for him. He'll never come back. Ah, a good deal of Ralph's cash went that way."

"And Ulyett's too."

"Ralph took Ulyett's money? I don't believe it. Besides, the fellow had none, unless he stole it. Quite capable of that, I don't doubt. I noticed the girl Darlow

mentioned him in that first letter, said he had called to see Ralph in Driffield. Wanted to borrow more money, of course."

"Or to get paid." Quentin felt impelled to defend Ulyett, even at the risk of giving his uncle the fatal clue.

"Nonsense! Nothing of the kind. You'll not make me believe that rubbish. But about Esmé Rusholme. If Ralph was philandering after her, what's the meaning of Aveland's telling him to keep away from Sandhayes? Pretty cool, I call that!"

"A man has a right to forbid another his house if he chooses."

Elkanah glanced at his nephew, and restrained himself. The letter had touched his pride. He had had time to ponder it since his son's death. Now he would have flown into one of his rages had he dared; but the tone of Quentin's voice was ominous, so the elder Fleming contented himself with saying,

"Oh, ay, Aveland has got a handsome daughter, and he fancies nobody is good enough for her. That's about it, I suspect." He glanced again at his nephew. "You are often at Sandhayes. I suppose it is Frances Aveland. Well, I'll make no objection. I'll overlook that impudent letter of his. It's time you married, Quentin."

"I am not sure that I shall marry," said Quentin, slowly. "We will not discuss the question, anyway."

"Not marry!" Elkanah fairly gasped in wrathful astonishment. "Why not, pray? Have you gone crazy? What the deuce is to become of the money, I'd like to know? And there's not only the money to be thought of: we're not sprung up like mushrooms; we're as old a family as any in the county, and you are the last. Do you want me to marry again at my time of life? Take care you don't drive me to it! But you are independent of me, and so you

don't care what becomes either of me or the money."

"I certainly don't care about the money, but if I could buy back Ralph's life with my own——"

"There!" interrupted Elkanah, irritably, "don't tell me any more. I don't set up my son as a saint; and, as for business, Ralph would have made ducks and drakes of the finest fortune in no time. You're all right; you'll keep things together. If one of you was to go, it was best to be Ralph. I'm not such a fool as not to see that—unless you're getting your head full of whims, the Lord knows where from. What is it to me whether you want the money or not? Can't I leave it as I please? Do you think I'm going to endow an hospital with it?—or send the Congo niggers to college? It's a fine thing if a man cannot leave his earnings to his own kith and kin without them

sniffing at it! I don't care who you marry, provided she is a respectable young woman; but marry you must. If you like Aveland's daughter, I'll undertake to swallow that letter. If Esmé Rusholme——"

"Nothing would induce me to marry Esmé Rusholme," said Quentin, emphatically.

"Do as you please. You'll do that anyway. I'll be shot if this won't give me an attack of gout. I shall be sending for McKie to-night—more guineas in that old rascal's pocket! That girl of Aveland's is an only child, which is an advantage. Your wife's sisters don't matter, but your wife's brothers are apt to prove expensive relations. By the way, I have had fresh handbills printed and put up, increasing the reward to seven hundred. The first bills were getting dirty and torn; these will stir people's memories, and let them know I'm still on the alert and ready and willing to pay the sum—now seven hundred—if anyone has sense enough to

earn it. Did you see them as you came along!"

"I did not notice."

"Well, you will as you go home. There is one by the station."

Quentin made no reply. He opened the door for his uncle, observing afresh the shaken look of the old man. He had aged perceptibly during the last two months. Where was the use of telling him that his nephew did not intend to marry? Why contradict and irritate him needlessly? Quentin was not sure that he should not marry. It had seemed impossible a little while ago; it had even seemed wrong. But after every self-sacrificing resolve there comes, sooner or later, a mighty reaction in favour of a precisely opposite course; and this opposing current had seized upon Quentin, sweeping him out from the narrow channel within whose boundaries he had purposed to remain, into the wide glorious

ocean. Ages ago his Norse ancestors had set sail in spring for fairer lands, heedless of what the end of the voyage might be. Better the joyous rush over the sunlit waves, no matter what breakers ahead, than sitting at home like a craven monk. To-day had given him a feeling of reckless exhilaration; the subtle intoxication of Wildersmoor, when earth seems to stir like a Titaness in her sleep, to stretch her mighty limbs, half-roused by the whisper of Spring—a slow, heavy awaking, like that of Buonarroti's Dawn: for here is Spring, no dancing flower-decked maiden. Often it is the more barren places of earth that wield most enduring influence—the desert, the steppe, the moorland. These sink into the human spirit, colouring it with their own hues—a deep indelible colouring, as of dark iron. For the silent expanse possesses, or seems to possess, a force of repressed life wanting in sunnier spots; as in the cold

marble of the Dawn dwell the sorrow, the despair, the vitality and endurance of the great Florentine himself.

Thus the scents of that rolling moorland —of moss and peat and freshly-turned soil, pressed out and held in solution as it were by the warm, humid climate—pass into the blood like rare wine; till at the yearly resurrection the familiar earth seems to become flesh and flesh earth, and kindred dust calls unto dust—not to lie down in death, but—to rise to fuller life and rejoice greatly.

So it happened inevitably that the penetrating odours of the wet brown earth—strange fumes arising from earth's alembic —that he had breathed year after year, now in the time of their returning—subtle and strong as ever, for when does Mother Earth grow old?—swayed Quentin Fleming mightily towards the reaction that had already faintly begun. Between this re-

action and the scent of Wildersmoor running riot in his veins, Quentin was in no mood to recall his resolutions of two months ago. He was beginning to suspect that those self-immolating intentions might possibly repair a well-known pavement. And seeing that our good intentions may not, after all, be so altogether excellent as our natural conceit would have us believe, it may be well that most of them find their ultimate destination in a place where—of course—we are not likely to meet them again.

## CHAPTER XVII.

THERE was not much conversation in the drawing-room. Elkanah settled himself in an arm-chair by the fire, opposite his sister-in-law, who had taken up her knitting. Esmé, at Mrs. Holt's request, dragged out of the smart piano a lugubrious wailing, politely termed "A Poet's Lament;" after which she entertained her hostess with anecdotes of the Sunday School, while Quentin took her place at the piano and soothed his soul with song.

"Don't stop, lad," said Elkanah, as the ballad came to an end. "I recollect your

father singing that thing when we were young fellows. It seems but yesterday" —he knitted his grey brows—"yet half the world has died since then."

"Surely that is an exaggeration, Elkanah?"

Mrs. Holt never allowed such rampant expressions to pass unchallenged.

"It's near enough, Maria," settling himself to listen as his nephew's voice rose again.

Esmé did not pay much heed to the singing, she did not care particularly about it. It was not an accomplishment to be encouraged in a husband, as leading to personal vanity and an undue love of society. She was accustomed to her father's organ-playing — John Rusholme had a chamber-organ in which his soul delighted—that was different. The man who playeth, playeth to himself; the man who singeth, desireth an audience and

applause. Esmé resolved that when she married Quentin, he should settle down to more sober tastes than music.

The song ceased. Not so the Sunday School anecdotes. They appeared to be a harmless topic of conversation, and Quentin was rash enough to join in.

"Are your scholars satisfactory on the whole, Esmé?"

She paused.

"Perhaps I can hardly put myself on a level with the other teachers, but the children are very good."

Esmé depreciated herself on principle. He that humbleth himself shall be exalted; but if the exaltation did not arrive speedily, things were unpleasant in the neighbourhood of Esmé Rusholme.

"You are indefatigable in well-doing, Miss Esmé," observed Elkanah from the depths of his chair.

"I think it only right to do what one

can, Mr. Fleming. It is so little, after all." Then to Quentin—"Do you know whether help is still needed at North Rode? I could again spare alternate Sunday afternoons, and I do so delight in the work."

"I will ask the Patons if they want more assistance," he replied, lazily, "but I am afraid the Sunday trains are not very convenient. North Rode is not bountifully supplied at any time, you know."

Esmé arranged the lace frilling of her sleeve.

"I could come on the other line to Wildersmoor. For such a purpose you would surely drive an old playfellow across the moor, Quentin? I should be so pleased to be of the smallest use to Mr. Paton, and of course I could not possibly walk the distance."

"An excellent plan," said Mrs. Holt, with emphatic approval.

Elkanah shot an expressive glance at his

nephew, who, though considerably taken aback, rose to the occasion.

"If Paton has a class requiring a guide, philosopher, and friend, I will take care that the dog-cart meets you at Wildersmoor station whenever you like, Esmé. I am sorry I cannot be charioteer myself, but I generally go over to North Rode every Sunday morning for service, and don't come home till dinner."

There was a moment's silence. Elkanah Fleming, perceiving the drift of things, began to enjoy himself. He was so desirous Quentin should marry that he would have accepted almost any niece-in-law. But now that he had discovered where his nephew's choice lay, the joint scheming of Mrs. Holt and Esmé amused him, and also disposed him to lean more towards the Avelands. For a Fleming to be hunted into matrimony was undignified; therefore, as the old man saw the very

deliberate arrangements of the two conspirators, he chuckled over the equally deliberate repulse they received.

"Where do you lunch, then?" inquired Mrs. Holt, with severity.

"Sometimes at Sandhayes, sometimes at the Vicarage," replied the culprit, with great cheerfulness. "There are charitable souls at both places. Later I have occasionally taken a hand in the Sunday School, as you propose doing, Esmé."

Elkanah nodded approval, for to uphold Church and State—always remembering to keep a tight hand on the parson—and to seek a suitable wife, are good and reasonable things, and much to be desired in one's heir, and, indeed, in all men. For these are the solid British feet on which the Empire stands.

Then the elaborate clock tinkled ten, and Esmé rose, saying she had "promised to be home early. Mamma was alone.

Isabel and George had gone with papa to a dance at the Wards', so the carriage could not come for her. Would Quentin walk with her?"

Here Elkanah interposed, a cab should be sent for. But of this Esmé would not hear, it was not worth while; the cabstand was so near, she was sure Quentin would not mind.

Of course Quentin could not mind. He signified his willingness to walk to the cabstand or anywhere else; and Esmé, followed by Mrs. Holt, disappeared to put on her hat.

"You're in for it, lad," observed Elkanah, when they were alone. "Don't tell me it's Maria, or poor Ralph, or anyone but yourself. That young woman means you, and she'll let you know it as you walk home. Cab?—pooh!—she doesn't intend to take a cab. She intends to bring you to a better state of mind—from her

point of view. You're not one to be chivied into marrying a woman, are you?" in a doubtful tone. "I don't care who you marry, but I shall be annoyed by Maria's crowing if you have chosen one woman and she makes you take another."

Quentin laughed.

"My dear uncle, there really is no cause for alarm. I don't suppose I am the subject of the attack you imagine."

"You'll see," quoth the elder Fleming, oracularly.

And Quentin did see before the end of that walk.

The night was fairly clear for Woffendale, where the pall of smoke ever interposes between earth and heaven; and the air was mild and damp and stifling.

"I think," said Esmé, when they had made their adieux and were out in the long gaslit road, "it is a pity to drive in such fine weather. I will walk home. I should

so enjoy it. You will have plenty of time to catch your train, Quentin."

"Lots," he replied good-humouredly, glancing down from his own unusual height at the tall thin prim figure of his companion, a figure which suggested somehow a scantiness of mind and body; so different — so very different to Frances Aveland's luxuriant grace.

They walked on silently for a few minutes. The road was a tolerably quiet one, leading from the town nearly to the eastern slopes of Wildersmoor Pike, and bordered by large stone houses with trim gardens where nipped evergreens strove with the all-pervading smoke; a wealthy depressing nightmare of a road, well-paved, well-drained, well-lighted, and absolutely hideous. Here and there flashes of scarlet light from the nearest furnaces obliterated for a moment the decorous gas-lamps, and cast dense greenish-black wild-waving

shadows, whose fantastic antics were an inspiriting relief from the deadly monotony of that curveless well-cared-for road. It is best to take that road at night. The erratic human spirit feels a grim delight in those mocking giant-shadows dancing derisively over all that is orderly and respectable.

Esmé and Quentin walked on; now in the furnace glare, now in the fantastic shadows, now in the sober rays of the gas-lamps and the glimmering lights of the houses. From the nearest came tinkling sounds.

"The Kerrs are lively to-night," said Fleming. "I hear Charlie's banjo going—a sign that they are not alone. They seem to imagine there is something dangerous about music without the excuse of guests. It may lead to riotous living and the husks of the swineherd."

Esmé, however, took no interest just then in the Kerrs; neither did she care to

discuss the prodigal. Even to her dull perceptions events were hurrying, crowding one upon another. The tide of life was hastening — sweeping through rapids. It behoved her to steer her bark well through the rush.

"I am afraid you are a little vexed with me, Quentin. You do not seem to wish me to come to Wildersmoor or to North Rode. Is it because old friends cannot always take kindly to the new? To me your welfare must always come before all other considerations, even the risk of offending you."

"Do I give the impression of being offended? If so, I apologize. As for North Rode"—designedly ignoring the allusion to Wildersmoor—"of course you and Paton will settle all that. Only do not be disappointed if you find there is no vacancy. The school is but a small one."

He spoke lightly, determined to keep

the conversation at a safe commonplace level if possible. Esmé's next remark was not promising.

"I should regret not being able to do some little good, but any disappointment I might feel would be trifling compared with that of seeing you bring misfortune on yourself by not listening to those who are your oldest and truest friends."

He looked down at her good-temperedly, they were passing a gas-lamp.

"Don't ask me conundrums, Esmé. I was never a good hand at that sort of thing."

"Do you not believe me your truest friend, Quentin? A man may need a woman's help."

"Thanks. But I am in no difficulty of any kind, so far as I am aware."

Silence again for a few minutes. The giant shadows danced wildly—jubilantly on the grey road, over the big stone houses.

The nearest furnace shot out waving banners of blinding flame. They were crossing the end of one of the principal thoroughfares and the hum of the busy streets came to their ears; not the steady roar of London, but an intermittent rattle, above which the human voice made itself evident, mingling with the sharp clacking of wood upon stone—the ring of clogs.

"Let me see, what day are you and Mrs. Holt coming over?" said Fleming, innocently.

"Have you forgotten already?" Esmé laughed, a little unpleasantly. "By the way, shall you ask the Avelands to meet us?"

"I had not thought of it. I had not thought of asking anyone. You will be so short a time at the Hall if you intend driving over to North Rode."

"Ah, you are like poor Ralph. You prefer keeping Sandhayes all to yourself."

Decidedly Esmé Rusholme's temper was not under control. Her jealous hatred of Frances Aveland flashed out even when it would have been much more politic to have concealed it. But Esmé believed Quentin to be entirely in her power, and minds like hers ignore their own effect upon others and underrate the strength of counter influences. Also, they believe in coercion. Bullying has to them the sacredness of a Sacrament, they and those of whom they approve being the priesthood appointed to administer it. If it fails, the reason of the failure lies undoubtedly in the abnormal wickedness of the person experimented upon. Quentin was a brand to be snatched from the burning and fashioned into a useful household tool.

"Probably you will meet Dr. Aveland at North Rode." Fleming's tone was indifferent.

"Now you are angry!" in an injured voice. "You have no cause to be. I don't care about Ralph. It is a little hard to be received as an enemy when one stretches out a helping hand. But I am ready to make every allowance for one in your position, Quentin. Nothing troubles me except the thought that you may take another fatal step and so lose yourself."

"I shall not take another step, and I have not lost either of us, for here we are," he rejoined carelessly, stopping before one of the solid, comfortable-looking stone houses. "I will wait till you are inside the door. Good-night." He opened the gate and held out his hand.

"Are you not coming in, Quentin?"

"Not to-night, I think. I have barely time to catch my train."

"There is a later train. Mamma would be pleased to see you."

"I should be still more pleased to see Mrs. Rusholme. Pray tell her so. Nevertheless, I cannot stay to-night."

"Then it is good-bye till this day week?"

"Oh, I may perhaps drop in before then. Good-night, Esmé."

"Good-night."

The shadows danced more wildly than ever, as Quentin turned back to the station. He was very sensible now of the strength of the web, and of the intentions of the weaver. She had, or thought she had, a hold upon him, and she meant to use that hold to separate him from Frances Aveland. A slow conviction forced itself upon his mind that his uncle's surmises might be correct. It was not a pleasant conviction to a man of generous feelings, and Quentin thrust it from him; yet it returned. How else could Esmé's words and manner be explained? Passing the elder Fleming's

house, he glanced up at the lighted windows and wondered for how much of this the old man and Mrs. Holt were responsible. Had they suggested to Esmé the preposterous idea that he—Quentin—had any stronger feeling for her than that of an old friend and playmate?

But what if they had? A few idle jests neither justified nor explained Esmé's attitude. Clearly she meant to tighten her grasp, and to use whatever weapon she had in reserve. What was that weapon? How had she obtained it? An element of astonishment mingled with Fleming's anger. Could this be his playmate, Esmé? He had never admired her, either physically or mentally; but he had had for her that lazy liking which generally exists between men and women who have been companions in childhood. He had believed her attached to Ralph, and had reproached him with desertion of her, when Ralph suddenly ceased

his visits to the Rusholmes, and bent his steps towards North Rode instead. Quentin had pitied the girl with generous indignation; and this amazing change in her, this wholly unlooked-for attack upon his love and his liberty, this attempt to coerce him by means of veiled threats — seemed to him well-nigh incredible, so unexpected was it.

He was fairly in the town now—the untidy jostling crowd making way before his swinging stride. Here and there a man saluted him. Once he stopped to pick up a screaming child that had tumbled into the gutter by reason of its clogs being too large for it. The street was full of children; in Woffendale they never seem to go to bed at all. A fight was progressing at one corner—a political discussion at another. It would have been hard for a stranger to know which was which. By the station several men were standing before a placard, one reading

it aloud. It was Elkanah Fleming's offer of a larger reward. The reading stopped as Quentin turned into the station, and the men looked after him with interest.

"Happen he'd give summat, too, if th' felly wur caught," suggested one. "Anyways he'd let th' chaps at th' Works ha' a holiday when th' hanging coom off. He couldna do less than that."

Quentin overheard the remark and laughed. There was a grim humour about the situation. Certainly he could not do less than that.

The slow train clanged on its way to Wildersmoor, rounding the right flank of the Pike. Quentin was alone in the carriage. When the noise and glare and smoke of Woffendale were left behind, and the cool breath of the silent moor blew in at the window, he looked out into the starry darkness where, in

the south-west, Orion glittered with sheathless sword, and said, aloud — "I will fight it. I will fight it to the end."

## CHAPTER XVIII.

FATE was gracious to the Rev. Travis Crosier when, one afternoon of the following week, he chanced to meet Quentin Fleming at the Woffendale station. There was a little crowd on the platform, waiting for the North Rode and Riverton train; and Crosier, desirous of collecting his thoughts, retired to the far end, where he paced to and fro, sentry-fashion, meditating.

For he was perturbed in spirit, pleasantly perturbed. He had been to lunch with the Bishop, a glorifying but terrible experience for a young and nervous curate. He had

enjoyed himself with fear and trembling. His ears had burnt and his face had paled. He had dropped his knife and fork with a fearful clatter on being suddenly addressed, and with a jerk of his elbow had sent a mustard-pot flying.

But the mustard-pot had been dexterously caught by a footman, and the Bishop had been mercifully oblivious of these small mishaps—had even been bland and gracious. Now that Crosier found himself once more upon ordinary ground, the very ordinary ground of Woffendale station, he strove to bring his disordered mind into some sort of coherence. He wanted to recollect all that had passed; his Lordship's expressed opinions upon this, that, and the other. As a matter of fact, the wary prelate's opinions might fitly be compared to the pavilion of Pari-Banou; contracting till it could be held in one hand, or expanding to cover an army—either according to the owner's pleasure.

Woffendale's Bishop was far too wise to commit himself to any definite statement outside the Apostles' Creed. What with schismatics of every dye, rabid Evangelists, aggressive Broad Churchmen, and domineering Ritualists, the episcopal dignity is in these days no ambling palfrey, but a buck-jumping animal that needs well-nigh the skill of a Texan cowboy.

His Lordship of Woffendale was a good rider. Therefore the clearer Crosier's mind became, the less he felt able to recall the conversation. It had been soothing, paternal, elusive, pre-eminently safe. What had the Bishop said upon the question of birettas? Crosier distinctly remembered tentatively introducing the subject. But the Bishop had not said anything. He had turned his head at that moment to give an order to a servant, had then apologized for not having heard the Curate's last remark, and had blandly talked of quite

other matters. Which was a disappointment to the Rev. Travis Crosier, whose soul hankered after a biretta. He possessed to the full that amazing love of millinery that flourishes so luxuriantly in the masculine breast, and which—denied the tattooing and war-paint of the savage—finds vent in garments of many colours: in wigs and gowns, in hoods and aprons, and such like trifles of mint, anise, and cummin, that not infrequently obscure the weightier matters of truth, justice, and mercy. The Burning of the Vanities?—when did man ever burn his own particular Vanity? Had Savonarola left Art's fair creations in peace, and hurled instead his own gown into the flames, together with judge's robe and conqueror's laurel, one might feel some small sympathy with his fanaticism. For a great clearing of mental vision is to be obtained by the discarding of ordinary garments. Every petty tyrant, male or female, recognizes this

influence by depriving his or her victims of free choice in the matter of raiment ; thus blunting the sharp edges of individuality.

If, during the examination of Galileo, their clothes had suddenly flown off his judges, leaving the astronomer alone in possession of doublet and hose, it is possible that his theories might not have seemed so outrageous to his hearers. The dignity of the one clothed man might have had a subduing effect on the naked and astonished rascals. Doubtless, though, the end would have been the same. And why blame them ? Do we not all silence—or wish to silence, extinguish, or otherwise dispose of—those whose electric flame of life almost puts out our little farthing dip ? It is only natural to protect one's own candle.

Travis Crosier was not one of those graceless ones who see Geisler's hat in the judge's wig, and incontinently long to take

a shot at the obnoxious horsehair. The Curate believed in vestments, all and sundry. Personally, he felt they would afford him moral support; and as he paced the farther end of Woffendale platform he wished regretfully that he could have conveyed to Mr. Paton some distinct opinion of the Bishop's on this point — an approving opinion, of course. Crosier was inclined to consider his Vicar a trifle lukewarm.

Then the thought of Esmé Rusholme floated into the Curate's mind on the top of the biretta, so to speak. He felt that she too could give him the moral support he needed. She would be the ideal wife for a nervous clergyman. He wondered mildly whether her father would give her any fortune. Crosier's income from his curacy was too minute for marriage, and he had no private means. By-and-by he hoped to get a living, which he really deserved, being a good little man; then indeed he might

array himself as he thought fit; and if Esmé Rusholme——

At this point of his meditations Crosier caught sight of Quentin Fleming. It would have been difficult not to see him, towering as he did head and shoulders above the crowd. He was looking alert, aggressive, a determined light in his eyes. Fleming was not naturally aggressive, but if the ploughshare be good iron it may be welded into a good sword by the hand of Fate, that mightiest of smiths.

Since that walk with Esmé along the road with its leaping shadows, many things had grown clearer to him, and possible complications had unfolded themselves. He stepped on the platform feeling himself rather the sport of circumstances—a thing he hated. For all his easy good-nature, he had been accustomed to rule himself and his own life; to feel his fate as it were under his own heel. Now that it seemed

to be rising, not at his bidding; writhing round his feet, making as though to twist and coil higher, pressing the life out of him; now that this intangible yet deadly enemy was upon him, Quentin felt possessed by a certain rage of life—of fierce opposition to all that would stifle and drag him down. The passion of renunciation that had dominated him on the moor that December night was dying fast, unheeded.

Fleming was returning early to Wildersmoor to be in readiness for his self-invited guests. He had duly conveyed Elkanah's twenty pounds to Cyril Paton, who had received the contribution with much self-congratulation on his own forethought in asking Quentin to mention the library scheme to his uncle. The Vicar further expressed himself delighted that Mrs. Holt and Miss Rusholme should take sufficient interest in the library to come over to North Rode on account of it. Did they intend

returning to Woffendale by train? There might be some little time to wait. His wife would be pleased to see them at the Vicarage. To which Mrs. Paton had assented with an amused glance of friendly assurance and the remark that "Cyril really ought to invite Mr. Crosier, as he admires Esmé Rusholme."

Quentin's merely masculine intelligence did not altogether comprehend the glance, but he felt vaguely comforted. His instincts told him that Nina was a loyal friend. Like many women of her type, she had a genius for friendship. He had not again thought of her remark till now, when on the Woffendale platform he met the eyes, or rather the spectacles, of Travis Crosier. Then Fleming recalled Nina's words with a flash of intuition. Here was deliverance, indeed! Never before had the meek little divine appeared so like an angel of light.

Quentin edged his way through the

crowd and invited the Curate to join the party at Wildersmoor.

"Come on with me now, Crosier. There will be a spare seat in the dog-cart, you know."

"I shall be delighted," stammered Crosier, beaming. "Mrs. Paton mentioned to me the interest Miss Rusholme took in our projected library. I have been telling the Bishop about it. I have just been to lunch at the palace."

"Have you? He is a pleasant old boy. I must ask him to the Hall. He has not been there since my father died. I have been somewhat remiss as regards my social duties."

To hear the Lord Bishop of Woffendale spoken of as a pleasant old boy gave the Curate a slight shock. He paused for a moment before replying, while the Wildersmoor and Riverton train steamed up and the platform cleared.

"I daresay you find the Hall rather

lonely," he ventured to observe, stumbling into the nearest carriage.

"I hope to remedy that by-and-by," smiling.

Crosier looked sympathetic. He had heard Nina Paton's opinion as to the attraction Sandhayes had for Fleming, and he would have liked to express his gratitude for the assistance he himself was receiving in his love affairs. He had comparatively few opportunities of meeting Esmé Rusholme. This unexpected invitation was really so very nice. But Crosier stood in considerable awe of Quentin, and fearing to offend, thought it best to speak of less delicate subjects. It was only polite, however, to keep to matters personally interesting to his companion.

"Mr. Fleming ages very much," he said, with a little deprecatory cough to attract attention. Quentin was looking out of the window at the familiar outlines of the Pike

drawing nearer. "It is sad that his son's murderer cannot be traced. Yet, doubtless, all such matters are best left to the vengeance of heaven."

"The criminal usually thinks so," said Quentin.

"Yes, certainly. A very happy thing," responded Crosier, rather flustered. After a moment's pause he resumed:

"That blind man—Blind John—do you believe his story?"

"Oh, yes. I have not a doubt of it."

"There seem to be several cottages near the Hall," the Curate went on. "I asked Mr. Paton about them. He thought that end of the moor was not in his parish."

"That is an old dispute. Nobody will own us. Every surrounding parish says we are not within its boundaries. We are free-lances, so to speak. But hall and hamlet have generally chosen to attach themselves to North Rode."

This spiritual isolation was an awful state of affairs to Crosier's mind.

"I think I will call upon the people," he said in a tone of subdued dismay. "I suppose there would be no objection?" interrogatively.

"None whatever on anybody's part," returned Quentin, amused at Crosier's evident idea that the hamlet was possessed by Satan, and trying to live up to the character of its owner. "But I assure you the people are all quiet and respectable members of society."

Then he thought of Granny Darlow, and wondered whether Crosier would consider her a quiet and respectable member of society, if he chanced to hear the accepted version of her career.

There could hardly be a greater contrast than between the kindly, precise little divine, with his soul's ears well stuffed with cotton wool, and his soul's eyes shaded by smoke-

coloured glasses, lest the cries and light of life should confuse and dazzle him—and that tragic figure, old, withered, yet still vigorous, who dwelt on Wildersmoor; whose eyes had looked fearlessly into greater depths than the dark pools, and quailed never before the skeletons therein; who, like her of Mycenæ, having been sorely smitten, smote again, and with deadly completeness; and, what is still rarer, remained steadfastly in the same mind, repenting never. What would be Crosier's opinion of Granny Darlow?

Quentin looked at him as he sat evidently meditating on the spiritual darkness of the neglected hamlet. What weight would his opinion carry upon any serious question of life? The thought was flat heresy; yet it seemed to Fleming that a human spirit of Granny Darlow's calibre might give better advice to a harassed soul than could Travis Crosier; the withered finger of that wicked old crone might point

to a more excellent way—to a fuller life than could enter into Crosier's philosophy. At least the old woman would leave the spirit free to spread its wings and try its powers of flight. She would not timidly cage it, lest that flight should lead into storm and darkness. Beyond the storm is yet the pure blue—the clear sunlight. If, with the force and wisdom of the one could be blended the moral scruples of the other——

"Dear me!" ejaculated the Curate, coming out of his reverie. "I had no idea we were so near Wildersmoor."

The day was still and grey, with little warm sea-airs wandering now and then across the moor, and rustling the ivy that waved its green banners from the chimneys of the old Hall. The air was so mild that some of the cottagers were sitting at their doors in comfortable, old-time fashion, and on the long wooden bench outside the Grey Wolf, a row of elders smoked and gossiped, and

watched with interested eyes the arrival of the few passengers alighting at Wildersmoor.

One of these elders—the last man in the row—was Blind John; and as Quentin's familiar step fell on his ear, he touched the grey lock that hung over his forehead.

"A noice day, Mr. Quentin."

"Yes, John, it is." Fleming stopped, and John rose. Crosier looked at him with interest as he stood there, his knotty hands clasping the knob of his stick, his ruddy face with the downcast eyelids over the sightless eyes, the peculiar listening turn of the head, with its thick mat of grey hair.

"This is Mr. Crosier with me," said Quentin, and John touched his lock again.

"Do you live in one of those cottages?" Crosier spoke very distinctly, slightly raising his voice as though he imagined John was deaf as well as blind.

"I moind your voice well, sir, in church

at North Rode, though I didna know th' step. Ay, I live in yon last un. Owd Granny Darlow next door redds oop an' cooks fur me; but being as I conna see, th' Lord only knows how hoo keeps th' place."

"I think it is all right, John," interposed Fleming, feeling Granny slandered. She was a clean old woman, with all the north-country love of scrubbing.

"I'm main glad to hear it, sir," responded John, rather as though he wasn't, "fur I've had an argyment now an' then wi' th' owd lass, an' I thowt happen hoo'd take it out of me i' th' redding oop. Hoo's one o' them soart that yo' conna tell what they'll be oop to."

"I am proposing to visit the cottages here, John, and to read to the people," said Crosier. "I might take you and your neighbour Mrs. Darlow together."

"Thank you, sir. Ay, Granny and I

are mooch th' same wi' reading. I conna see to read an' hoo dunnot know how."

"Doesn't she?" the Curate was surprised, "why, how is that? She ought to learn."

"I wouldna loike to be th' teacher," John opined, with dry sarcasm. "As fur how it wur, well, yo' see, sir, hoo's owd. Hoo wur born afore Parson Hazelrigg's toime, an' he died when I wur a little lad. He wur rare an' fond o' mackerel fishing, wur owd Parson Hazelrigg, an' theer's a sight o' mackerel fishing betwixt here an' Man. So when th' season coom round, Parson 'ud shut oop th' church o'er at North Rode an' be off to th' mackerel grounds fur three month an' more. He used to say th' folks on Wildersmoor wurna given to deeing, so it wurna loikely any on 'em 'ud want burying; an' if they did they mun send a cart o'er to Woffendale fur a parson—theer wur no railways then. As fur th' babbies, they mun wait fur to be christened; an' folks as wanted th' banns

give out, they mun wait too. 'When it cooms to be atwixt mackerel an' marriage,' parson 'ud say, 'it stonds to reason as marriage mun wait, 'cause th' fish won't. So behave till I coom back,' he says 'an' I'll give each couple a sovereign fur to begin housekeeping with.' Eh, he wur a rare un, wur owd Parson Hazelrigg!"

Fleming laughed.

"I haven't a doubt of it. Shall we go on, Crosier? Good-bye, John."

Crosier's face during John's narrative had been a delicate study of shades of apologetic dismay, culminating in positive horror. For a minute or two he trotted along in depressed silence. Then he turned for sympathy to his companion.

"One feels so overcome when the Church's past neglect is brought home to us."

"I think the clergy of that day sufficed for the needs of the people," Quentin replied

encouragingly. "We are too apt to judge of the wants of past times by our own. I don't suppose Hazelrigg's easy ways did any harm. I am not sure that we do not over-teach in these days, cram people so much with the ideas of others that they lack room to grow any of their own. Not that I wish to curb your enthusiasm, Crosier."

"No—no, not all. I quite understand. But I really cannot excuse Hazelrigg's absences."

The matter harassed Crosier's soul till the arrival of Mrs. Holt and Esmé Rusholme by the three o'clock train. Fleming entertained his visitors in a little room opening out of the long white drawing-room, and also looking out on the gardens at the back of the Hall. A lawn gay with bright beds of crocus and cyclamen stretched from under the French windows to a group of beeches. Beyond the beeches rose the Pike, bearing on its slopes terraced walks, warm

and sheltered even in winter by reason of the hill protecting from the north and east. This little room was in tones of pinky chestnut, with pale spindle-legged furniture that harmonized with the yellow flower-painted case of the piano. On the walls were a few fine water-colours, and two curious old mirrors, oval in shape, the frames formed by twisted gilt dragons ; some carved book-shelves in one corner ; and a high carved chimney-piece, under which a true northern fire blazed in the wide deep grate.

"This is a pretty room," Mrs. Holt observed, approvingly, while she sipped tea out of funny little cups that had come over from Holland long ago. "I recollect your mother having it done up in this colour. It needs more drapery about — embroideries, I mean. No, thank you. I never touch sweet things," this to the Curate, who was nervously skipping about with a cake-basket. "Yes, more em-

broideries. I always admire the drawing-room at your house, Esmé. You have quite filled it with your own beautiful work."

Esmé certainly had. The Rusholme drawing-room presented the aspect of an Art-Needlework School. She looked up from her tea-cup with a deprecatory air.

"You are very good to praise my small efforts, Mrs. Holt."

"Not small," said Crosier, with timid gallantry. "Miss Rusholme's efforts are never small—nor their results."

Here he gave the basket too much swing, and its contents rolled out on the floor, whereat he blushed violently. Quentin came to his rescue.

"Never mind, Crosier. We will not hang the cake round your neck as a penance. Bran will be glad of it."

"Do you allow that animal in here?" said Mrs. Holt, with surprised severity, as

the huge hound rose up from behind a screen, and came forward to the feast.

"Oh, yes, of course. Where I go, my friend usually follows," Quentin laughingly rejoined; "and as, you see, we are neither of us very small, we need plenty of room to orb about."

"Ah, a wife would soon correct all that," putting up her eyeglass, and looking round again.

"I hope not. Love me, love my dog, you know."

Mrs. Holt did not reply to this frivolous remark of her host's. She was thinking that he needed a wife very badly indeed. The folding-doors into the drawing-room were open, and Mrs. Holt perceived that fires were burning in both the fireplaces. Naturally mean, she could never reconcile herself to prodigality in the matter of coal.

"You should not have lighted three fires for us, Quentin," she said, with what

was intended to be an amiable smile. She really could not help reproving him for extravagance.

"They are always going," he replied, carelessly—"all the winter at least, and most of the summer, too. I like a place well aired."

Well aired! And of course there would be fires in library and dining-room, and perhaps upstairs also. Mrs. Holt felt that Quentin's fires were like Ralph's gambling—quite a wicked waste of money both. She began calculating how many tons of coal must be used yearly at the Hall, and what a saving in that item alone Esmé Rusholme would effect when she became mistress at Wildersmoor.

"I really think it is time we started. Which way are we going, Quentin?" asked Esmé plaintively. There was nothing to be plaintive about, but she thought a plaintive manner looked well occasionally.

"Any way you like."

"Then I should like to pass the cottages. It is quite a long time since I have been to Wildersmoor, and I naturally take an interest in them."

Fleming did not inquire why Esmé should naturally take an interest in the hamlet; the expression sounded ominous. He agreed readily to her wish, and was grateful to Crosier for immediately beginning a long account of his intention to visit the benighted ones. Possibly the Curate hoped Esmé would offer to assist in the good work. But she did not. She reflected that while she was instructing Wildersmoor with Crosier, Quentin would be in Woffendale, or at Sandhayes. No use wasting energy.

Granny Darlow, sitting with folded hands at her cottage-door, watched the dog-cart and its occupants as it passed. It is curious to reflect how often the

thread of our lives is held for a time by men and women scarcely known to us; who, consciously or unconsciously, are the mightiest of friends, the deadliest of enemies. Esmé glanced carelessly at the shrivelled little figure, with its bright black eyes, its crown of snow-white hair. Not once did she dream how daring and reckless a spirit there masked itself as a quiet tidy old woman, a cottager in an obscure hamlet. Nor could Esmé's small soul imagine that the spirit looking out of those black eyes might be watching the play from a better position than her own; might have full view of the stage, and be awaiting the moment to interpose, while she, Esmé, was impatiently catching glimpses from the wings, and trying to be both prompter and self. Esmé did indeed remember that Granny was ancestress of a young woman named Rossela; but so far as Esmé's knowledge went,

Rossela's adventures concerned the past, and it was in the present that Esmé's interests lay. Therefore, Granny Darlow and her grand-daughter did not concern her. Had she known of Rossela's application to Elkanah Fleming, her opinion might have changed. But she did not know.

## CHAPTER XIX.

At North Rode Vicarage, Nina Paton—in walking dress and a discontented frame of mind—was standing by the window, looking down the village street.

"I wonder what has become of Mr. Crosier," she said, glancing over her shoulder at her husband. "He professed himself delighted when I asked him to come this afternoon and show the library to Esmé Rusholme. Yet the train is in and there are no signs of him."

She turned her eyes again to the street, more particularly to the post-office, on the

first floor of which were Crosier's modest apartments.

"It must be singularly pleasant and cheerful," she continued pensively, "for a Curate's lodgings to be exactly opposite his Vicar's windows."

"I don't see any objection." Paton said this in a tone of mild surprise.

"Neither do I. Only, were I the afflicted Curate, I should feel an unholy desire to sit with my legs dangling out of the window, smoking a long clay."

"Sometimes, my dear, I positively don't understand you."

"Don't try, dear. No man can understand a woman. The wise man is he who accepts that fact as he does the solar system. Happily I am not a Curate, so there is no fear of my sitting with my legs dangling over the sill. I wonder what can have happened to Mr. Crosier. Surely he

has not been 'butchered to make a Bishop's holiday!'—Cyril, that is an improvement on Byron's line."

This time Paton smiled a little.

"I thought you liked the Bishop."

"So I do. Immensely. I am sure if he had lived in mediæval times he would really have tried to convert a heretic before he burnt him. Why, there they are!"—as the dog-cart appeared at the end of the street—"And Mr. Crosier with them. How clever of Mr. Fleming! I could not have believed a man would have had so much sense."

The cottage intended for the library had not needed many alterations. A door had been knocked out here and there, and shelves put up, and painters and paperers were busy.

"How very convenient," said Mrs. Holt, putting up her eyeglass as the Vicar ushered her within, followed by Esmé and Crosier.

Mrs. Paton and Quentin lingered in the doorway.

"Where did you meet him?" Nina inquired softly, indicating the Rev. Travis.

"At Woffendale station. He seemed slightly depressed by the episcopal lunch, so I thought Miss Rusholme's society might cheer him."

"Evidently it has done so. He looks positively bacchanalian, so great is his joy. I am glad you are sympathetic, Mr. Fleming."

"I believed I was helping your arrangements, Mrs. Paton," said Quentin; and they both laughed.

"Well, you are. I am sure Mr. Crosier admires Esmé Rusholme immensely, and I am equally sure she is exactly the wife for him. Therefore it is clearly our duty to give him every chance. What do you suppose Mrs. Holt is saying to my husband? They are both looking so pleased

that I am afraid she is recommending some horrid course of study for the women."

"The retort is obvious. You can recommend some horrid course of study for the men."

"Thanks for the idea. I will do so. Or incite Frances Aveland thereunto. Sometimes it is more effective to set another woman to worry one's husband. I wonder if they are coming, by the way;" and Nina stepped back over the threshold to look down the road.

"The Avelands? Do you expect them?" And Nina noted the tone of Fleming's voice, the light in his eyes, as he too looked down the road.

"I told Dr. Aveland he ought to appear, being one of the promoters of this affair," waving her hand comprehensively; "Cyril wanted him, and it would be a real charity to me, as it is so difficult to talk to Mrs. Holt."

Mrs. Holt was enjoying herself immensely, airing her views upon reading, the Vicar listening with interested attention. Mrs. Holt was admirably adapted to be an authority upon the subject; she possessed the inestimable qualification of knowing nothing whatever about it. She read a religious magazine on Sundays, and some scientific work during the week. Women of Mrs. Holt's type frequently choose scientific works for their secular reading. They desire to be fashionable in a serious manner, and as that branch of human weariness makes no demand on either heart or soul, it suits them exactly; giving them a comfortable feeling of superiority over those who prefer Ariel's honey to Caliban's pig-nuts.

Esmé Rusholme, on the contrary, was not enjoying herself. She had not undertaken the journey to hear Crosier's eager explanations of this arrangement and

opinion of that. He was very devoted and deferential, certainly, and quite ready to give up any notions of his own in favour of hers. If Fleming had not been within reach, Esmé might have thought seriously of Crosier; the curate caterpillar becomes the butterfly vicar, and as a rule, northern girls smile on the Church. But as things were, Crosier was a nuisance. Esmé had intended inspecting the library with Quentin on one side and Paton on the other. She meant to give the Patons the impression that she was Quentin's fiancée, or would be very soon. Whereas, Crosier was hovering beside her with ostentatious unwelcome devotion, Paton deep in converse with Mrs. Holt, and in the doorway Fleming stood laughing and talking with Mrs. Paton, whom Esmé detested, for no reason save the instinct that feels a foe. What were they laughing at? And why were they looking down the road? The

climax of Esmé's discontent was reached when across her companion's meek babble came cheerful sounds of greeting, and Dr. Aveland's voice saying, "What do you think of the village library, Mrs. Holt?"

Mrs. Holt did not like Dr. Aveland. She had not met him half-a-dozen times, but he was not a Woffendale man, and his daughter might marry Quentin—two excellent reasons for disliking him. It was with an even more wooden countenance than usual, that she replied—

"No doubt it may prove useful."

"Mrs. Holt thinks," said the Vicar, "that not many women will avail themselves of it."

"I imagine they will, relatively to the size of the village. Yet if not, what then? If only one comes, if only one scholarly soul is helped—one empty mind filled and ennobled, surely that would be sufficient reason for keeping up the whole thing."

Aveland smiled as he spoke, but Mrs. Holt did not smile. She put up her eye-glass and inspected Frances with manifest disapproval. They were now all standing in the room intended for the men.

"I had rather thought of that room being used for newspapers only, and a few games—such as chess and backgammon," this hesitatingly from the Vicar, whose mind was somewhat unhinged by his conversation with Mrs. Holt.

Here Fleming interposed—

"I cannot have the women turned out, Paton," he said, good-humouredly, but authoritatively. "If the men want to play games, they must do so in their own room."

Frances, who was standing beside her father, shot a grateful glance at Quentin. "I daresay the men would prefer backgammon to books," she said, eyeing the Vicar from under her long lashes. "It is

more natural to them. They have not the thirst for knowledge that women possess. Eve plucked the apple because she desired greater wisdom and fuller life, whereas Adam was apparently content to loaf about with his hands in his pockets."

Mrs. Holt dropped her eyeglass in astonishment; really these Avelands were very queer.

"There is a good deal to be said for that view," remarked Dr. Aveland cheerfully. "Let us hope there will be numbers of equally enterprising Eves to patronize the library. I am afraid there will never be any lack of Adams."

"Perhaps industrious Eves may again induce idle Adams to take a nibble at knowledge now and then," suggested Quentin.

"I think we have seen all," said Mrs. Holt severely. "Shall we go on to the Vicarage now, Mrs. Paton?"

They walked in straggling fashion up

the village street, and here chance gave Esmé the opportunity she wished. Some remark of Nina's had drawn the attention of the others for a moment, and Esmé, turning to Frances, whose friendly advances she had hitherto repelled, said with that chill, precise intonation of hers—

"It seems a pity that you should fuss about the library, or anything here, when you will be leaving before long."

Frances looked almost as much surprised as Mrs. Holt had done.

"We are not leaving Sandhayes. We have never had any intention of doing so," she said, with her slow, sweet smile. "We are both fond of the place."

"But of course you will not remain there when you are alone," pursued Esmé. "Quentin said the other day that he supposed you would go to your relations after your father's death."

This was a pure invention of Esmé's,

Fleming having never said any such thing.

It was impossible that Frances should not feel a sudden chill at her heart when the dread shadow she so constantly strove to forget was thus brutally pointed out to her. The rich bloom on her cheek paled for a moment, then returned with a rush, as amazed anger succeeded the chill. It was so extraordinary to Frances Aveland's mind that any presumably civilized being should speak as Esmé spoke. But civilization is rarely more than skin-deep, and cruelty is the most ineradicable of human vices. Between the rough who tramples on his wife, the scientist who galvanizes the ripped-up nerves of living sentient creatures, the woman who beats an infant—between all these there is no difference: the principle is the same; the pleasure in cruelty, the outcome of the inherent belief that might is right. Reverse the cases: make the wife

and the infant the stronger, the four-legged animal the more cunning; — how public opinion would then range itself on the side of the former victims! We have no need of devils, so long as man disporteth himself upon the earth.

Esmé had the universal love of cruelty, restrained in her case by her surroundings. Still it was there, and displayed itself in dealing petty stabs, as well as in graver matters. However, the blow aimed at Frances somewhat failed in its effect, for she read in Esmé's eyes that the speech had been designed to vex and irritate, and the knowledge restored her habitual serenity. It was with untroubled voice that she replied—

"I am glad to say my father is in much better health. Of course he varies. To-day he is wonderfully well." There was no opportunity for Esmé to say more. The conversation had become general again.

Dr. Aveland's voice—he was walking on in front with Mrs. Holt—came clearly to her unwilling ears—

"You do not read any modern fiction, Mrs. Holt? Not even newspapers? I was about to say there is a poem of Kipling's—the Galley Slave—which often comes to my mind here. The grim force of it seems to have a sort of affinity with Wildersmoor. I suppose it is because on the moor one gets down to the beginning of things, to the simple tremendous facts of life and death; just as in India there is always the flicker of the sword—whether the sword of steel in the hand of man or the sword of the pestilence in the hand of the Angel, matters not—there is the sword. Here we forget it, hide it behind bricks and mortar and much speaking. And for want of that warning glitter we sit down and maunder about our sensations when we ought to be up and doing while yet the

breath of our life is blowing. In India men do their work as Araunah his threshing—in full view of the Destroying Angel. Better the armëd Angel on our threshing-floor than that we should come under the sweep of that sword in our sluggish sleep, like the miserable Assyrian hosts. The Scythians swore by Wind and Sword, by Life and Death. It is an oath I have always admired; and in some odd way, Kipling and Wildersmoor constantly remind me of it."

Mrs. Holt had never heard of the Scythians. In fact, what she did not know would have made a fine library. And she resented, as half-educated people always do, any allusion which she did not understand. In her sight it was a covert insult. Therefore she observed coldly, that she did not consider contemporaries worthy of study.

"Yet Shakespeare was once a contemporary," said Aveland, smiling.

But Mrs. Holt declined further conversation with this tiresome southerner who spoke of things she knew not, whose thoughts were not her thoughts, and whose deep eyes were so inscrutable. Mrs. Holt instinctively felt those eyes took views of life of which she would not at all approve. As an orthodox Christian she could not rejoice over the probability of a fellow-creature's approaching death; but as an average Christian of the tough-conscienced kind she did derive distinct consolation from the reflection that these Avelands would not long trouble the still waters of her world. She drew the same conclusion that Esmé had done: of course the daughter would leave Sandhayes after the father's death.

Nina's pretty little drawing-room did not prove any pleasanter to Esmé than either the drive or the library. The fire-light sparkled cheerily on silver and china, and lit up a face here and there, the others

remaining in twilight shadow, for the February day was closing. Dr. Aveland—forsaken by Mrs. Holt, who was talking to Nina — seated himself by Esmé and endeavoured to find some topic of common interest on which to converse. But by this time she was so thoroughly out of temper that she barely replied to him. Crosier, too, meekly attentive to all her wants, met with cold snubbing. She wanted to hear what Frances and the Vicar were saying. They were deep in a discussion, for Paton was mindful of his wife's opinion that one day Frances would be mistress of Wildersmoor, and it was best to be friends all round. Quentin was assisting Mrs. Paton and talking to her and to Mrs. Holt, whereas Esmé had intended exhibiting him as her especial property. Every moment her annoyance increased. She felt he had avoided her, and that somehow North Rode did not lend itself to her arrangements as Woffen-

dale did ; in short, it refused to be arranged, things slipped away from her grasp. She gave up the idea of offering to assist in the Sunday School. She resolved that she would not come to North Rode again until she came as Quentin's wife. Then she would make things unpleasant for Nina, whom she suspected of being at the bottom of the failure of the day's outing.

"It is growing quite dark," said Mrs. Holt, presently. "I think, Quentin, it is time we started homewards."

"As you like, Mrs. Holt. I will see about the dog-cart. By the way, where is it? Have you got it, Mrs. Paton?"

"Really I don't know. Cyril, have we got Mr. Fleming's dog-cart?"

The Vicar looked up from his discussion.

"The dog-cart, my dear? I have not the least notion. I'll go and see."

"I don't think it is at our place," said Dr. Aveland.

"I understood, Quentin," remarked Esmé, icily, "that you had sent the groom on here to take charge of the dog-cart."

"So I did, and he was here all right. But I never thought of telling him where to take it. He would have to decide himself where I should be most likely to turn up."

Quentin felt a malicious pleasure in saying this. Mrs. Holt stiffened visibly.

"I fear we shall be late for dinner. Perhaps we had better take the train here?"

"Oh, I will get you to Wildersmoor station in lots of time. It would be a pity for you to have the trouble of changing at Riverton. Crosier, will you drive back with us and dine with me?"

The happy Curate accepted joyfully, his gratitude increasing momentarily. Another blissful time beside Esmé, the

delight of assisting her at the station, and afterwards a good dinner and pleasant evening with Fleming at the Hall.

"I can put you up if you like," Quentin added, crossing the room and sitting down in the Vicar's vacant chair by Frances. Crosier however explained he had a service at the church in the morning, so was compelled to decline.

"I would take the service for you with pleasure, Mr. Crosier, if it wasn't for that tiresome St. Paul," said Nina, filled with admiration for Quentin's brilliant strategy. "As it is a christening I am sure I could manage it much better than you will."

Crosier was confusedly murmuring something about being "very much obliged," when Paton re-entered with the information that the dog-cart was not on the Vicarage premises, and he had dispatched a boy to Sandhayes in search of the missing trap and groom.

"Smith knows my haunts," said Quentin to Frances.

The remark was overheard by Esmé, whom this afternoon had more than ever determined to act without delay. Quentin might choose to pretend he had not understood her meaning when they walked along the Woffendale road a week ago. He should have no chance of such pretence the next time. Everything that day had combined to exasperate her. Crosier's presence deprived her visit to North Rode of the significance it might otherwise have had; and the prospect of the return drive—again with the Curate beside her—was a good deal more than Esmé Rusholme's temper could stand. When the missing dog-cart appeared, she got in without the trifling ceremony of bidding good-bye to anybody; being further annoyed by noticing that Fleming did not reprove the groom for the mistake of having gone to Sandhayes. Crosier fussed about

arranging rugs; Mrs. Holt expressed to the Vicar a dignified hope that his "well-meant undertaking might do some little good;' and the dog-cart rattled away over the cobbles, bearing at least one radiant countenance, that of the Rev. Travis Crosier.

## CHAPTER XX.

"It is evident," said Nina, looking after the retreating dog-cart, "that either my education or Mrs. Holt's has been much neglected. One of us is a savage. I wonder which! Do not go yet, Dr. Aveland. Well, if you must, we will walk a little way with you. I want to grumble at those awful women. How truly thankful Mr. Fleming will be when he gets rid of them at Wildersmoor station! How he will enjoy his dinner, knowing that every minute is taking them further away."

"My dear," remonstrated Paton, diving

into the hall for his hat—they were all standing on the front steps—"Mr. Fleming would not have driven them over unless he liked them."

"Their coming was their own arrangement, entirely," replied Nina. "He told me so himself. Also, he told me neither of them would ever give the library one penny."

The Vicar's face fell.

"I fancied they took an interest in it," he said, "especially as Mr. Fleming of Woffendale was so good as to send a donation. I cannot understand why they came!"

"The reasons, dear, were various; none of them being amiable ones."

"What a prospect for Crosier!" remarked Aveland. "How can you reconcile it to your conscience, Mrs. Paton, to assist him o such a wife?"

"Oh, Dr. Aveland, Esmé Rusholme will suit him exactly. She is one of those

women who agree very well with their husbands and bite their fellow-women. Then the men speak of them as 'sweet,' and marvel that other women do not like them!"

Frances was silently patting her little terrier who had come to look for her, as was his wont when he missed her at home. He had been so deeply absorbed in the contemplation of a rat-hole in the Sandhayes stables that he had not seen his mistress go out. Consequently, after searching the house, Malise had trotted to the Vicarage as the dog-cart left. While the others talked, and the terrier begged for yet more notice, Frances pondered again those words of Esmé's: that Quentin had said she—Frances, would probably leave Sandhayes after father's death. There is something peculiarly cold-blooded in discussing arrangements that can only come into force after the death of one still living,

laughing, moving among his fellow-beings. Anger rose again in Frances' heart and burnt in her cheeks as she looked on her father and recalled Esmé's speech. But her anger was against Esmé, not Quentin. He could not have said it—not in that way. Nothing is easier than to persistently question a person and then to repeat an impatient answer in a very different manner to that in which it was uttered. Thinking thus, and remembering the furtive malevolent expression in Esmé Rusholme's eyes, Frances dismissed the matter from her mind. It was unjust to Quentin to dwell upon it.

"I think," she said, slowly, replying to Nina's remark, "that the most trying thing about such people is that one has perpetually to talk down to their level, and even then they are never pleased! In a little while one would be reduced to absolute silence—as you were, father."

She looked at him and laughed.

"I was," he admitted. "The elder lady was offended with me—I don't know why. And the younger lady was offended with everybody—also I don't know why."

"I will tell you, Dr. Aveland," said Nina. "I am longing for a confidant. Frances dear, kindly take charge of Cyril, and expunge from his mind any erroneous ideas Mrs. Holt may have left there."

And Mrs. Paton walked on with Aveland, leaving the other two to follow them down the village street.

The evening was closing grayly in, lights shone in the cottage windows and through the open doors. True, it was February, but a Wildersmoor February; no need to close doors so early against the soft cool sea-mist that came rolling up over the sandhills from that dim murmuring line out yonder in the west. So the sturdy fisher-folk lounged by their doors, dark against the glow of fire and candle-light behind them. Only the last

cottage was closed and silent, the one that was to be the library.

"It will soon be as bright as the rest," said Frances, looking at it as they passed. "We must certainly have a lending department, for the sake of the women who live on the moor farms, and who cannot be always running to and from the library. What is the matter, Mr. Paton? Do your visitors still trouble you?"

"Well," said the Vicar gloomily, "Mrs. Holt seemed to think that a small lending library of useful books would meet all the requirements of the neighbourhood, thus freeing that room for papers."

"What are useful books, Mr. Paton?"

"Well—er—," rather taken aback—"domestic matters."

"Cooking and dressmaking? And does Mrs. Holt propose to restrict the men to cooking, tailoring, and farming? Who has a right to say to any human mind, 'Thus far

shalt thou go and no further'? And are books that inspire noble thoughts less useful than those which treat of dinner and finery? Not that I despise either. I am very fond of sweetmeats and new gowns, Mr. Paton; but —'the life is more than meat.'"

The moon, rising over the moor, illumined her face as she spoke. Priests are not, as a rule, very amenable to female influence. Their own craving to be worshipped checks any inclination to worship aught save the Divine Being, who can be so conveniently ignored when such ignoring is desirable—put aside on a shelf like an image of Buddha till next pooja-time. Yet even the Vicar was not proof against the witchery of Frances Aveland's smile. He visibly softened, and brightened a little.

"Oh, I am not at all disposed to agree entirely with Mrs. Holt. Besides, Mr. Fleming seems to be much interested in the library, and of course I should feel

bound to consult his wishes before those of anyone not belonging to the parish. Only I am naturally desirous to hear various opinions on the subject."

"Then will you hear mine, Mr. Paton?" said Frances, still looking at him in the moonlight with smiling yet earnest eyes. "Mrs. Holt would make people good by keeping them ignorant. Well, that has been tried ever since the world began, and has signally failed in the majority of instances. I would make people better by wider knowledge. I would give them noble thoughts to fill their minds—old tragedies, 'great griefs of days gone by,' to dwarf their own; and wide—the widest knowledge of good and evil, that they may see that good is good and evil evil—not merely because their teachers say so, but because they are so in the inherent nature of things. I would teach them that saying of our Lord's that never yet has been taught—pardon me, Mr.

Paton, but it never has—'By their fruits ye shall know them.' I would show them the fruits of evil that they may know and avoid it. I would teach them that good is Life, and evil, Death—moral, physical, eternal. For I believe with Rabbi Maimonides that the souls of the utterly wicked will perish by their own corruption, even as a diseased body perishes—being unable to stem the sickness which devours it. I do not believe that my soul is necessarily immortal, but only so long as it has enough goodness in itself to overcome—with God's aid—its own evil; just as a body only lives when it has health enough to resist or overcome disease. You shake your head, Mr. Paton, but you cannot prove me wrong. Do not say you are 'troubled with the ghosts of dead ideas' and afraid of the light. Why, in this light lies the solution of the problem you have found so hard to solve—the question of punishment after death. You cannot believe in Pur-

gatory, you shy at the Puritan flames, yet you feel there must be some punishment hereafter, for here the worst crimes generally go unpunished. In short, you don't know what to say, so you shirk the question. But it seems to me quite simple—'The soul that sinneth, it shall die.' 'What doth it profit a man, if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?' Having given us free-will—the power to slay ourselves—God does not take it away. He cannot prevent us perishing if we will do so, any more than a man can prevent the fire burning his child if that child plays with it. I do not know whether I have made myself understood?—it is somewhat difficult to express clearly one's ideas upon these subjects."

"I perfectly understand your meaning." The Vicar's tone was chilly, his softened mood had vanished, he straightened his back. That a young woman should talk to him in this fashion instead of meekly

asking *his* opinions! He would have liked to administer a severe snub, but there was Dr. Aveland: when father and daughter are attached to each other, it is not advisable to attack the daughter; wait till the father is dead, then you can trample to your heart's content. Also, there was Quentin Fleming. Nina might be right; certainly he had shown no deference to Mrs. Holt's ideas that afternoon. All things considered, it was best not to reprove Frances too harshly for youthful presumption; and the Vicar was really kind-hearted, so he contented himself with saying—

"I perfectly understand your meaning. It is a pity, however, that at your age you should attempt to grapple with matters quite beyond you; especially as you seem to ignore the fact of pardon being promised on repentance."

"Oh, no, I do not. I fully believe in the saving power of repentance—that is

the recovery from sickness. The punishment then will be the regret felt for the wrongs done that no repentance can undo :—

> 'If we fall in the race, though we win,
> The hoof-slide is marked on the course;
> Though Allah and Earth pardon sin,
> Remaineth for ever remorse!'

That it is why I should like to make people better—to save them from the remorse that must be theirs hereafter, even if they do repent in time. I am so very sorry, Mr. Paton, when I think how terrible that remorse will be. I should like to help to save a few from it. But I have always noticed that whenever one tries to raise women, one incurs the resentment of nearly every man of one's acquaintance. One may give them sewing and tracts, and speak of them with contemptuous pity—and that is all right. But if a woman has the welfare of her sex at heart and tries to raise them as a mass, every man attacks

her as the slave-owners attacked those who denounced slavery — and for the same reason. Slavery was so convenient, and so is the condition of the mass of women convenient—for men. Even the slaves often scoffed at those who would set them free. One nigger spit in an Abolitionist's face. Whenever I hear a pampered woman—there are such—helping the men to attack women who feel as Nina and I, and hundreds of others do, I always think of that nigger. Not that I am now thinking of Mrs. Holt," added Frances, with a soft laugh—"really I am not! But of course this small matter of the library here is part of a much greater matter. She that is unjust in little is also unjust in much. I am sure if you think about it you will agree with me."

Paton was positively growing angry. He didn't exactly know what to say; he was not accustomed to this type of woman

His wife could have taught him much, but he did not wish to learn. He glanced at his companion's face: it was beautiful and serene as always, and that serenity annoyed him. How like she was to her father! Aveland had that same level, weighing, appraising gaze—not keen, but reflective—a gaze that looked not merely at the outward semblance, but thoughtfully sought to read the soul. It was odd how that same thoughtful gaze seemed to possess the quality of Ithuriel's spear. Beneath it people became more vivid, either for good or evil. A strong personality invariably acts as a disintegrating force. There is a turmoil wherever it appears, other forces disentangle themselves and range on opposite sides. Hence the storms that usually rage round strong characters, both in life and after death.

The Vicar was distinctly angry. He was the more angry because he recognized

the futility of argument or snubbing. It was useless to argue with either Frances or her father. It was equally useless to attempt to ignore them. They were like the rising tide, which only recoils to advance. Not that Paton actually disapproved of anything Frances had said. He merely disapproved of her having anything to say. Occasionally he felt a little uncertain as to what really were his own ideas, but he was quite sure that the laity —and particularly a young woman—had no right to be more grounded and settled than he was himself.

"I think," he said, with emphasis, "that the North Rode library will manage to get along without your so unnecessarily harassing yourself."

"Ah," rejoined Frances, tranquilly, "when you have lived longer on Wildersmoor, Mr. Paton, you will understand how one is impelled, as it were, to look round

and reflect. There is something in the grey stillness that lays a finger on your lips and sets your mind working. Really, we cannot help it, and you will soon get used to us."

This assurance did not tranquillize the Vicar, though it was intended to do so. However, they had reached the Sandhayes gates, where Nina and Aveland were standing by the clipped yews—teapot and boat both looming gigantic in the misty light.

"How I love those funny old clipped trees," Nina was saying. "No, thank you, Dr. Aveland, I am sure we cannot stay to dinner. Can we, Cyril?"

"I am afraid not. I am expecting one of my churchwardens this evening."

"Then we shall see you to-morrow."

On the way home, the Vicar gave his wife a brief summary of the conversation between Frances and himself.

"Goodness me, Cyril! You mean to say you quarrelled with her! The idea of a man walking with a handsome woman and quarrelling with her! Fortunately, she will not quarrel with you. Frances never quarrels with anybody. She merely sticks to her own opinions and goes straight on. What was it about?—partly the library? Oh well, you know you were vexed by that tiresome woman Mrs. Holt coming worrying here and never giving anything. Did I not tell you those women were only coming to make mischief? — here it is already! However, it does not matter. Frances will not quarrel, as I have said before."

"Mrs. Holt may give something yet," Paton interrupted. "Miss Rusholme has influence there, and she is interested in Church work."

Nina gasped with despairing indignation:

"Now do not tell me, Cyril, that you are still worshipping your fetish, Esmé! Believe me, you will never get anything, either for the library or the schools, through Esmé Rusholme. How blind you men are to be taken in by these mincing images! 'Good,' do you say? No, she is not good, any more than a wasp is good. She may be moral—I'm sure I don't know. But Torquemada was extremely moral. The only man among you with any discernment is that charming scamp, Jack Ulyett. He hated Esmé. He understood her. I wish he were here now; he was a real ally. 'Gambler,' was he? So I have heard—and I don't care. He was an attractive, kindly gambler, anyway. Now Ralph Fleming was a repulsive one. There is the difference."

"My dear, I never heard any good of Jack Ulyett."

"Neither did I. I wish he were here

now that I might tell him so! I should be delighted to see him coming along with that smiling, half-deprecating air, like a dog hoping for a bone; then valiantly drinking at least ten cups of tea, and telling me all the news of Woffendale, and begging for all the news of North Rode in return. I am sure you ought to be quite fond of him, Cyril, considering how deferential he always was to the Church, as represented by you and Travis Crosier. Yes," continued Nina, meditatively, "poor Jack had the rare merit of knowing himself to be worthless, and of appreciating the consequent situation."

"I don't see that Ulyett has anything to do with the present situation," said the Vicar. He had not been listening particularly.

"Neither do I. Yet one cannot tell, for he always struck me as being one of those wandering atoms that tumble into the scale unexpectedly. But to return to this

afternoon—now do listen, Cyril. As I have already said twice, Frances will not quarrel; but it is not the least use either arguing with or opposing her. She only pauses, and then takes fresh hold. And Quentin Fleming will do anything she wishes," added Nina, significantly.

"It is all very annoying," said Paton testily.

His wife only laughed, and the Vicar began to cheer up and to think that perhaps it was all Mrs. Holt's fault after all.

Yet if he still secretly preferred Esmé Rusholme to Frances Aveland, who can blame him? The preference was natural. She taught in the Sunday School, deferred to the Vicar's opinions, and possessed absolutely no gifts or ideas whatever. Ignorant?—yes, but ignorance is not displeasing; rather the reverse, for obvious reasons. Cruel?—well, people do not mind cruelty so long as they themselves are not the

victims. Besides, so long as motives are good, actions cannot possibly matter; and Esmé's motives were always excellent. No wonder the Vicar sighed as he pictured the Millennium that might be if Esmé—not Frances—reigned over Wildersmoor.

His dreams that night showed him Quentin Fleming with two wives, and himself distractedly striving to conciliate both.

## CHAPTER XXI.

SPRING was always late on Wildersmoor. It had a trick of seeming to come in February, with soft warmth and scattering of celandines like largesse of gold coin. Then with the blossoming of the blackthorn would follow the blackthorn winter—bitter winds and driving sleet; while the natives stolidly warmed themselves at huge fires, and talked of bygone springs, warmer and bluer, when fogs were few and drifting smoke unknown.

One chilly April evening, when the white silky willow-catkins were bursting into bloom—a sign that winter was drawing

off his forces preparatory to a general retreat—a workman turned into the Grey Wolf.

"Stranger?" said Vose, interrogatively, signing to William to bring the beer ordered.

"Nay," returned the man, "I'm a Woffendale chap born an' bred. Gleave's my name—Sam Gleave. But I've been a matter o' seven year down Driffield way."

"Ay, I see. I thowt I didna know thee."

"I dunno as I've ever been on Wildersmoor either," continued Gleave, "sin' I wur a lad, an' my owd grandam sent me out wi' th' teetotals on Whit Monday. Th' owd lass wur mad fur me to join 'em, but I never wur one o' them red-hot uns. It never seemt to me as a mon wur cut out fur tea-drinking. It dunnot seem to fit reet somehow. Not but what I've drunk many a gallon o' tea when I wur courting a lass a while back; but that wur love, and it didna

seem to disagree. It's when a mon cooms to take tea with his church-going that it turns him up loike."

"Ay," assented Vose, with an approving nod, "it do. I've tried it mysen, though tha mightn't believe me, an' I dunnot hold wi' it. Art tha going far to-neet?"

"I'm bound fur Woffendale. I did well enow in Driffield, but I didna loike th' folks. I fair pined to get whoam to th' owd town. I stood it fur seven year fur th' sake o' th' wage. However, at last I says to mysen as I couldna bide theer longer, so I just clapped my savings i' my breeches pocket, an' my tools i' th' bag, an' coom along. I meant to ha' gone straight through to Woffendale, but somehow I got into the wrong train, an' coom to North Rode. So I've had th' walk o'er Wildersmoor. I'll see Mr. Quentin Fleming tomorrow. I reckon he'll give me a job. He knows me well enow, does Mr. Quentin.

Many's th' time I've gone fishing wi' him when he wur a lad, an' I wur boy in buttons at owd Elkanah's."

"I make no doubt he'll give thee a job," said Vose. "He's th' reet soart, is Mr. Quentin. He's giving th' yearly play-acting to-neet o'er at th' Hall. Tha con see fro' th' door how it's a' lit up. I'm going up theer mysen by-an'-by. Being a tenant, Mr. Quentin asked me hissen, an' told me to bring a friend if I'd a moind. Happen tha'd loike to coom?"

"Thank ye, I'd loike it rarely, if theer's a dark corner as I con set in. I hannot getten my Sunday clothes, tha sees."

"That's all reet," said Vose. "Step into th' Snug an' ha' a smoke. Theer's one or two chaps theer, Blind John among 'em. Happen tha knows him?"

"I've heard tell on him. Th' chap as found Mr. Ralph Fleming that neet."

Vose nodded, and Gleave betook him-

self to the little sanded parlour, where Vose introduced him as a Woffendale man, and the company made room for him before the fire, that was nearly as large as the one blazing in the bar. For the season mattered little; Wildersmoor folk had fires all the year round, and if you needed a fire, why of course you needed a good one. To express a preference for small fires was conclusive evidence that you came from "foreign parts," and you were viewed with distrust accordingly. The mental attitude displayed by a stranger towards the hearth was regarded as a test of social position. Did he appreciate a noble blaze, and bask contentedly in its light and heat, as one accustomed to worship at its shrine? then there was a fair presumption that he came of decent folk who had duly reverenced the household gods. If, on the contrary, he disdained the ruddy glow, or sneaked up to it like some poor homeless

cur, grave suspicion attached to him and his unknown belongings. So that when Gleave drew up an empty chair with an air of decision, settled himself in it, filling his pipe, and leaning back with a half-sigh, half-grunt of contentment, the grunt was sympathetically echoed by the company, as expressing a general feeling of good-fellowship towards him.

This was, on Wildersmoor, the most courteous way of intimating that the stranger's society was welcome, and that any remark he might choose to make would be received with respect. In such situations, a grunt, it may be observed, has considerable advantage over words. It does not demand a reply; and obviously, there is more politeness in leaving a man in peace for a few moments than in disturbing him to talk before his pipe is fairly under way and his thoughts smoothed out. Therefore it was etiquette

on Wildersmoor for the stranger to speak first.

Gleave and his companions smoked a minute or two in silence. Then he said—

"I'd loike to hear a bit o' news, chaps. I've been away i' Driffield nigh on seven year, and seen nobbut save i' th' papers. To be sure, I see Mr. Ralph Fleming now an' then when he came o'er on business, an' fur th' shooting—ay, fur th' shooting," Gleave repeated reflectively, with a slight shake of the head, as though there was much to be said about that same shooting.

"Mr. Ralph wurna much," observed one man, adding apologetically, "though, to be sure, he wur murdered."

"Ay, he wur," said Gleave; "but theer wur rare doings at that theer shooting-box," and he shook his head again. "I wur friendly wi' one o' th' keepers, an' he asked me if I'd loike to coom o'er an' take a

look at th' place. So I went one Sunday, an' a bit o' a fire broke out that afternoon i' th' stables. Mr. Ralph wur away, but me an' keepers fettled it. When it wur o'er, th' missis coom out an' give us summat fur our trouble. Hoo wurna a lady, but hoo wur a good-looking lass, wi' black hair an' rosy cheeks. I wur thanking her when hoo says to me, quick-like, 'Tha mun be fro' Lancashire?' 'Ay,' I says, 'I'm a Woffendale chap, thank th' Lord!' Wi' that hoo says hoo wur a Wildersmoor lass, an' begins to ask me about a' th' folk. But, theer! I couldna tell her owt, fur I'd been in Driffield more'n six year, an' hoo hadn't been more'n two."

"A Wildersmoor lass?" repeated the man who had before spoken, "it mun ha' been Rossela Darlow. Hoo's th' only lass hereabouts as has left th' place. An' what tha says fits her, fur hoo had black hair an' rosy cheeks. But her grandam says

hoo's in service i' Lunnon. Hoo went nigh on two year ago. When did tha see her?"

"It wur i' November," replied Gleave, "but hoo wurna i' service," he added significantly.

"I'll be bound it wur Rossela," said Blind John suddenly. He had been listening attentively to the conversation. "I never did think owt o' that lass. Look at her owd grandam—th' owd besom! Hoo redds up well enow fur me, an' I ha' nowt to say agen her cooking, but eh dear!—theer's tales o' her young days as 'ud make a body's hair stond on end!"

"Tha'rt reet theer," commented another.

"An' if hoo wur nobbut young again," pursued John, "theer isna owt as that owd lass wouldna be up to! An' I'll warrant th' young un is noan so mooch better. Would tha know her again?" to Gleave.

"Th' lass?—ay, o' course."

"Well, tha'rt safe to see Rossela if tha stays hereabouts. Them soart allus drift back."

"I shall bide in Woffendale, sure enow," responded Gleave. "I've had my filling o' foreign parts. Neither th' lads nor th' lasses wur owt to depend upon. I'd courted a lass off an' on fur three year, when one Sunday I see her walking along wi' a Driffield chap's arm round her waist. So I went up an' says, 'Here, I conna put up wi' this. It's him or me. Make up thy moind.' Hoo tosses her head an' says 'Hoo isna going to wed a Lancashire clog;' did yo' ever!" looking round for the sympathy which was instantly accorded. "I says, 'A' reet, I'll take thee at thy word. But I'll punse this chap's head fur him afore I go.' Wi' that I give him a black eye, an' he give me another, an' we had a pretty rough toime fur about a minute an' a half,

when I give him one as landed him in th' gutter, an' theer I left him. 'Tha's killed him!' says th' lass. 'Nay,' I says, 'I've nobbut spoiled his Sunday cloas,' an' I walked off. Eh!—I wanted no more foreign parts after that! I just coom whoam an' I'll stay whoam."

"Theer's nowt like it," said one of Gleave's audience. "Theer's allus summat interesting whoam, an' theer's nowt a mon cares about elsewheer. Tha'll see owd Elkanah's new placards all o'er th' town. He's keeping it up! He's offering seven hundred pound now instead o' five."

"Tha hannot found the chap yet?" said Gleave, turning to Blind John. "Seven hundred pound would set thee up, loike."

It seemed to be tacitly acknowledged that a blind man might earn blood-money without incurring the usual odium attached to it.

"Ay, it would that," said John, "an' I'll

get it yet. I'd swear to that chap anywheer if ever I coom across him. An' somehow I think as I shall happen on him one o' these days."

"I shouldna wonder. It's queer how one cooms across folk."

Here Vose spoke from the doorway:

"I reckon it's about toime to think o' going to the Hall."

## CHAPTER XXII.

THE play of which Vose spoke was an annual entertainment at the Hall—usually a dramatic one—to which gentle and simple alike were bidden. Originally there had been a tenants' ball, but the elder Fleming—Quentin's father—tried the experiment of putting up a temporary stage in a large barn, and presenting Hamlet with Elizabethan simplicity as regards accessories, engaging a Woffendale theatrical company.

The change gave Wildersmoor so much gratification, affording it subject for literary conversation for a year, that the experiment

became a settled thing; and Macbeth, Winter's Tale, Marlow's Faust, and the Duchess of Malfy successively appeared. The morals of Wildersmoor did not permit the dwellers there to frequent the Woffendale theatres, but the drama at the Hall was a different matter. And the plays selected appealed to Wildersmoor sympathies.

"I'll try them with the Agamemnon and the Antigone one of these days," Nicholas Fleming had said. "I believe the classics would suit them all round."

But that day did not come, and Quentin this year inclined towards more cheerful drama. He selected the Merchant of Venice—not without a thought of a stately maiden at Sandhayes who had much in common with Bellario's pupil.

So to-night when the April twilight fell there flowed a continuous stream of guests

of all ranks to the old Hall. It is easier in country places for all classes to mix than in large towns; there is greater simplicity and more good feeling. Gleave, Vose, Granny Darlow, and Blind John—the last three in their best clothes—set off together. Granny and John were, by grace of Quentin, privileged to do a little gleaning after supper—Granny because she was old and a widow, John because he was blind.

The four walked on in the April starlight, Blind John's stick steadily tapping the ground. Even with companions he preferred to find his way after his own fashion. He turned his face to the moor.

"'Tis a clear night," he said.

"Ay, clear enow," responded Vose.

"I'll be glad to ha' a sight o' Mr. Quentin," Gleave observed. "It's a matter o' four year sin' I set eyes on him. I'll warrant he hasna grown less."

"He's a fine big gentleman," said John.

"I wonder he hasna got wed afore now. But theer, it's little slim nesh chaps that most women loikes."

"Tha knows a deal about women, doan't tha?" retorted Granny, scornfully. "I reckon wnen th' Almighty created Eve He mun ha' taken a sight o' Adam's brains along wi' Adam's rib, fur th' most o' thee men-folk arena more nor half-theer. Thee con see th' bottom o' a beer-mug sharp enow, an' that's about as fur as thee *con* see."

"If tha says as it wur three parts o' Adam's tongue as wur took fur Eve, I mout agree wi' thee," replied John with slow sarcasm.

"I wouldna say o'er mooch about that if I wur thee," said the old woman sharply; "th' biggest gossip o' a woman is nowt to thee men when thee gets together at th' beerhouse, an' tha knows it. Thee con shut thee mouths tight enow when tha 'rt whoam,

but when tha 'rt a-setting smoking o'er theer, thee oppens 'em wide enow fur to swally th' moor."

John felt slightly uncomfortable. Granny had an uncanny reputation; could she by some occult means have become aware of the conversation in the Snug an hour previously? He hastily changed the subject. It was not advisable to offend "th' owd witch," for there was no one else in the hamlet to "redd up" and cook for him, and did she not concoct wondrous ointments for rheumatic limbs?

"Eh, dear!" he said, "to think as it's five month sin' I found Mr. Ralph o'er theer on th' moor."

"Ay," said Granny, "tha hannot yet caught th' chap tha guided to North Rode fur a' tha made so sure on it."

"Thee womenkind are allus in such a hurry fur everything," retorted John. "If yo' could ha' your own way, we'd ha' had

th' Judgment Day th' week after th' Flood."

"An' if yo' men could ha' things as yo' please, we'd never ha' any Judgment Day at all, fur th' most o' thee ha' good reason fur not wanting it."

"Theer's owd Elkanah," said Vose, as a carriage passed them.

"Eh, we mun be quick!" and John hastened his pace. These grand doings at the Hall would furnish him with conversation that would interest both his cronies at the Wolf and his clients on the moor. He trusted to his companions for descriptions of looks and dress—whether so-and-so favoured his or her parents and grandparents. While as for picking up gossip, he could trust his own ears to serve him well.

Granny Darlow had other reasons for going. She had not to keep up the reputation of a raconteur. What she saw and heard sank into her own mind and remained

there. She went because she had a great admiration of Quentin Fleming, and took a very deep interest in the drama of his life. Indeed, she was by no means sure that she would not take a part in it herself. She held herself in readiness should he need assistance—how or when she could not tell. But like a dog, she kept a watch on him and on all around him, prepared to rush to his defence if need be.

Presently she ensconced herself in the dark corner of a passage leading out of the flower-decked hall. Here, herself unseen, Granny watched the perpetual movement of guests in and out of the long white drawing-room, with the singers at the farther end. Quentin had invited the members of the Woffendale Glee and Madrigal Union, and they had joyfully availed themselves of the opportunity to exhibit their undoubted talent while the actors were getting ready. Granny's nook also commanded the hall-

door, and each arrival was noted by her with interest. There was a tolerable sprinkling of strangers, for a learned society had made Woffendale its head-quarters that week, and the savants were very willing to accept an invitation which promised a fairly amusing evening, with a good supper at the end. Fleming had accordingly asked most of them—not all. But for strangers Granny cared little. They were nothing to her. She came to look at the people she knew—the people in whom she was interested. For the mimic drama preparing in the barn she felt a slight contempt. It was the drama of life she studied—the drama in which she herself had played so strong a part. She came to look at the people whom she knew. Standing motionless in the shadow, she saw them pass and re-pass before her in the light and brightness and colour of the scene. Fleming himself was often in sight. Granny watched his greeting of the Avelands, her

keen old eyes resting admiringly on Frances as she stood—a tall white figure in a gown of some glistening stuff—beside a bank of red azaleas. Then Aveland himself, with his bright eyes and delicate dark face, sharpened by illness. Then McKie, gaunt and jovial; Travis Crosier; the Patons, Nina, in a pink frock—her pretty fair hair a mass of tiny curls. "A most unsuitable coiffure for a clergyman's wife," Mrs. Holt was heard to remark to Mrs. Rusholme. Esmé and her mother had just returned from a six weeks' visit to Bournemouth—an enforced absence from Woffendale that had not pleased Esmé. But Mrs. Rusholme made a rule of always going away in spring, and Isabel had protested she really could not give up Harry Haslam's society for so long a period.

Therefore to-night was Esmé's first meeting with Quentin since that afternoon at North Rode, and she meant to make

the most of it. It was, however, more difficult to speak to him alone than she had anticipated; he was so much occupied with his guests. A bachelor host has double duty to perform, and the interval of arrival needs to be well managed to escape dulness. In this instance the interval went cheerfully enough. People thought they ought to listen to the glees, therefore they were inclined to talk. They drifted into the library, where there was coffee; thence into the drawing-room, listening a little; and finally settled into groups in the hall, discussing this and that; while Celia's lachrymose lover explained his wishes to the river-god, or Mynheer van Dunck trolled forth his opinions upon the question of alcoholic refreshment. Certainly, the hall was an attractive lounging place; softly, darkly carpeted, gay with flowers, and warmed by the great fire blazing in the wide fireplace; as it always blazed from September till June,

for Wildersmoor held no delusions as to spring temperature.

"I am sadly in need of an astral body," said Quentin, addressing a good-looking grey-haired woman in a steel-coloured gown —a member of the learned society that was just then shining on Woffendale. "I desire to be in two places at once, and to talk to all my guests at the same moment."

"I am afraid an astral body would not help you, Mr. Fleming, for your spirit cannot inhabit both bodies at once any more than it can serve two masters. Your earthly garment would lie helpless and inert while the astral was disporting itself elsewhere."

"Then I give up the idea. I imagined my duality would prove useful to an embarrassed bachelor anxious to do his best."

"But why a bachelor?"

"I am not married. Did you think I was?"

"Oh no, I was told there was no Mrs. Fleming. Besides, it is easy to see you are a bachelor. You would not be so positive about everything if you were married."

"Is that a sign of single misery?"

"Certainly. We are pliable before marriage, men after. How I should like to attach you to our party. Do you remember our political argument at the Bishop's dinner last week? If you were to choose a wife from among us——!" regarding him reflectively.

Fleming laughed. "I find it a little difficult to attach myself to any party. The word politics 'surprises by himself,' more than ever in these days. Besides, I always look on the other side of the shield."

"Ah, you are one of the few who think for themselves. Everybody pretends to think, but the majority merely echo the opinions of their friends or of their pet

papers; and in so doing lose what little individuality they may once have had. I hope you will make no mistake when you marry. It would be a thousand pities."

"I shall not do that."

"That answer tells me you have chosen already. I shall be very curious to see your wife."

"I shall be delighted to introduce you to her when you come again."

"The Society meets at Driffield next year, I believe. That is not very far away. We all think it so good of you to invite so many of us. By the way, did you know the celebrated Professor Blank is one of us?"

"Yes, but I have old-fashioned notions of hospitality. I do not ask a man to my house unless I can welcome him, and as I do not approve of animal torture, I cannot extend a welcoming hand to a vivisector."

"Really?—of course, if you feel like that you are right. How you surprise me, Mr. Fleming."

"Do I? Once we tortured the human animal in deference to the opinions of judges and priests. Now we torture other animals in deference to the opinions of doctors and scientists. I fail to see that the latter have any more right to insist on legalized torture than had the former; and cruelty remains cruelty, no matter what the intentions of the person inflicting it."

"Now I wish more than ever that I could persuade you to join us. What an ally you would be! You seem so much in earnest."

"That," he replied lightly, "is the result of living on Wildersmoor. We are like the ptarmigan, we take colour from our surroundings."

"I understand. I have seen both

Woffendale and Wildersmoor—the Titan at work and the Titan at rest. It all reminds me somehow of Brand."

"I see the resemblance. All wild tracts of country are apt to produce men and women with convictions. McKie there, is a Galloway man, and he has convictions of the calibre of an eighty-ton gun. I think I see someone beckoning to me. This is one of the occasions when I desire to be in two places at once."

He moved away into the library, and Mrs. Holt observed vaguely to her brother-in-law, that "she could not imagine where Quentin got such ideas. No doubt he would lose them as he grew older."

"I think the lad is right," said Elkanah, bluntly. "I don't concern myself about such matters, but if a man has got any opinions, let him stick to 'em."

"I am rather surprised Fleming does not show more feeling for science," lisped

a young fellow with a receding chin and spectacles.

"Better let science begin to show feeling," growled McKie—he had pricked up his ears like a terrier at the sight of a rat's nose—"six or seven thousand dogs and cats being flayed, roasted, baked, disembowelled, artificially ulcerated, galvanized on ripped-up nerves, at Government expense in all the laboratories of Christendom! Oh, ay, science is a grand thing to respect!"

"Pray don't, Dr. McKie. You really make one feel quite ill!" Mrs. Holt hated McKie, and in making this remark she knew she would have sympathizers; in fact, a little murmur of assent did follow her words.

"Ye don't like to hear the truth," said McKie sturdily. "Ye don't mind such things existing—ye'll not raise a finger to stop or check them—but ye don't like to be

disturbed by the hearing of them. I don't doubt that was the feeling of the priest and the Levite. The wounded man wad be a gruesome sight, dusty and bloody, and a sair trouble to any that would fash themselves with the helping of him. So they just let him lie there, which was verra natural and according to human nature. The creatures must writhe out of your sight, and then ye welcome their torturers to your table. Natheless, never a creature writhes out of the sight of the Lord that made it, and ye all—men and women alike—will hae to listen at the Judgment Day, and to answer for your passive share in the ineequity: 'As ye have done it unto the least of one of these, ye have done it unto Me.'"

"But, Dr. McKie," said the young man with the receding chin, "do you really mean to say you believe in that nursery bugbear, the Last Judgment?"

"Assuredly!"—McKie was the grimmest

of Presbyterians, and would have gone to the stake in support of his opinions—"assuredly! And I wad say to unbelievers, that since nae man can tell what comes after death, it's weel to be on the right side—to gie the poorest reason for belief. It's aye easy for these smirking torturers with their sonsie incomes to deny the God above—and weel they may, for they daurna face Him. But denial proves naething but their boundless egotism. For the rest of ye, I was about to say ye echo the cry of Cain when ye turn a deaf ear to the sufferings of the puir beasts. Ye say ye are not their keepers. Weel—weel, it's a grand comfort to me that ye'll hae to repeat that before the Lord. I ken weel what ye are thinking—I am auld and ahint the times. That's as it may be. It's my ain opinion that I'm before the times—which is anither matter. Ay, before the times—these times when ye can blaspheme your Redeemer and deny your

Maker, and get the applause of the fashionable world whiles ye do it, but ye daurna say a word against yon animal-torturers. These be your gods, O Israel! There is neither Heaven nor Hell—there is neither Father, Son, nor Holy Spirit! But there is the Devil ye call Science for your worship, and there are the writhing beasts for your offerings; and ye say the work of your day is good—verra good in your sight!"

McKie stopped, and the notes of "Aileen Aroon" floated out from the drawing-room. Whether a burn from hot or cold iron is the more severe depends upon the skin of the individual burnt; but it is pretty safe to say that the burn from cold iron makes the stronger impression on the mind. It gives such an idea of staying power. For we know the red-hot glow will die, and rapidly too. Whereas the cold iron burns by reason of its coldness—and still burns and burns—

and who can tell the duration of the frost? A North Briton of the Covenanter type is very cold iron indeed. He is never heated nor flurried. He knows exactly what he is going to say, and he says it; and whether his personality be an agreeable one or not, there is no denying that it *is* a personality. Therefore McKie impressed his audience at least with the force of his dogged sincerity, if not with the justice of his opinions. Rusholme, that old Pict—feeling who can tell what faint stirrings of comradeship from those far-off days when Pict and Scot fought side by side, and the falcon's flight marked out the lands of Hay—Rusholme nodded approval; and the grey-haired woman, perceiving that here was another energetic individual, slipped into a vacant chair by McKie, and with much tact and pleasant appreciation endeavoured to ascertain his political leanings.

Only, while conversation rose again, the spectacled youth objected.

"Rather—er—bad form to make such a fuss here, eh?" he observed.

"Everything steadfast is bad form now-a-days," said Aveland. "The correct thing is to possess a mind as supple as an acrobat's back."

Standing near the spectacled one was another young fellow — a civil engineer, and at Aveland's reply, he laughed appreciatively, his white teeth and bright black eyes lighting up his swarthy face. He was strongly built and rugged of feature; by no means handsome, yet very pleasant to look upon; full of life and energy, and with the eyes of a faithful dog.

"I always back up old McKie," he said, turning to Frances, whom he greatly admired, only—as he put it to himself—it was easy to see that Fleming was first

favourite; "he's the sort of man you feel sure of, isn't he?"

Whereupon Frances was very gracious to the civil engineer, which cheered his soul and he talked on, the northern burr sounding in his speech, melodious though it was: a fine type this young fellow; one of the best the north offers. Four months later he was slain by fever, and buried in a hot West Indian island; whence, doubtless, his spirit fled home to grey cool Lancashire, and walked the wet familiar streets, and heard again the soft broad-vowelled speech that had been his own.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

Esmé Rusholme never felt the smallest interest in anything that did not directly concern herself, otherwise she might have noted the picturesqueness of the mingled audience that presently flowed down the gaily-decorated temporary passage to the transformed barn.

Not that the building had lost its barn character. On the contrary, Fleming had preserved that by leaving the rough brown walls and roof untouched. The arrangements were purposely primitive. The actors entered only by the wings. At the

back of the stage was a little painted scenery. That was all. The playbills, however, were dainty works of art—the whole play, with delicate illustrations. Quentin had spent thought and money on these, knowing that his poorer guests would cherish them. And it was noticeable how the bronzed fishermen and burly farmers and their wives appreciated the feeling which had provided those fairy books. Old Will Elliot was there, dirty as ever; but with clean hands and face, and a smart new coat. Gleave, conscious of his working clothes, modestly squeezed into a top corner near Vose, who had Blind John beside him. Granny found a vacant chair behind "th' gentry," close to Farmer Blackshaw and his wife. The latter, a buxom smiling dame, looked askance at Granny, and wondered audibly to her husband, how "the owd witch had the face to show herself among respectable folk!"

"Let-a be, let-a be," said Farmer Blackshaw, with masculine tolerance of impropriety, "happen it wurna exactly as folks tell it. An' it's many a year ago—afore thou an' I wur born. See theer, th' curtain's going up!"

The Merchant of Venice suited the audience exactly. Portia supplied the intellectual element, Antonio the commercial. His losses by shipwreck appealed to the fisher-folk, who were of opinion that Portia had better have married him instead of Bassanio. Whereas most of the landsmen thought Antonio "nobbut a fool, for a wee laddie could ha' seen what owd Shylock wur up to!" But all agreed that "Portia wur a grand lass," and one or two matrons meditated bestowing her name on their next daughter.

When the last scene opened in the moonlit garden at Belmont, Fleming quietly went out, with the intention of inspecting the

supper-room before taking his guests thither. Surmising this, Esmé slipped out too. But she did not follow him through the temporary passage from the barn to the house. That passage ended in the conservatory opening from the dining-room; and Esmé, knowing the place, took a short cut across a lawn into the house, and was sitting in a basket chair by a group of palms before Quentin entered the conservatory from the passage. She knew this would be her only chance of seeing him alone that evening. Living as she did in Woffendale, it was difficult to get an opportunity of speaking on that subject from which he had partially escaped that night at Elkanah Fleming's, in the winter. He should not escape this time, she thought, as she heard his approaching footsteps echoing along the passage.

And Granny Darlow? Of course Granny had seen Quentin go out, and

Esmé, and equally of course, Granny had also made a quiet exit, following the latter. She watched Esmé seat herself in the corner by the palms; then saw Fleming enter from the passage, walking quickly, evidently going straight through. His surprise, when Esmé rose and confronted him, was clearly observed by Granny.

"Th' impident besom!" she muttered, "waiting theer fur a mon as wouldna wait for *her*."

But the old woman could not hear what was said, and the annoyance visible in Quentin's face determined his human watch-dog to be effectively present at the interview. Outside the conservatory corner was a clump of laurels, dark in the April starlight. Here among the leaves stood Granny. Above her head a small pane of glass was open, thus every word spoken within became audible to the listener without.

"It was not Ralph—I never cared for Ralph." This in Esmé's precise metallic tones.

"Pardon me if I do not understand you, Esmé"—this in Fleming's voice. Then more lightly—"Will you come with me to the supper-room? In my character as hostess I am bound to see that all's well before, as host, I give the signal to fall to."

"You understand me perfectly well, Quentin," with unmistakable anger; "your affectation of ignorance is mere pretence. You have understood ever since we dined at your uncle's."

"I hope not," gravely.

Esmé laughed, a low unpleasant laugh.

"You owe me reparation even by your own showing. You say you believe I loved Ralph. Very well, who prevented me marrying him?"

"Not I, Esmé."

"Yes, you. And you bribed my cousin,

Jack Ulyett, not to tell what he saw that night on the moor—you bribed him with a thousand pounds. But I can compel him to speak if I choose; and whether I do or not depends on yourself."

Her anger seemed to have vanished. She was speaking with cold insistence.

"I never bribed your cousin. What wild tale you may have got in your head I cannot imagine. What do you suppose Ulyett to have seen?"

Fleming spoke with equal coldness.

Outside, Granny listened intently. She had known all along that Ulyett was on the moor that night, and had guessed he must have been the man whom Blind John guided. But Granny had kept this knowledge to herself, and Elkanah had questioned her in vain.

There was a short pause before Esmé's next words floated through the open pane. In truth, Quentin's direct challenge had

slightly discomposed her. She felt positive that he was Ralph's murderer, and that Ulyett had witnessed the crime and made capital out of it. Yet Esmé experienced a difficulty in charging Fleming to his face with having killed his relative. Had he appeared dismayed, despairing, she would have trampled hard. But he was cold, unmoved. A doubt crossed her mind. Could she be mistaken? Then she re-assured herself; she had confidence in her own conclusions.

"You gave Jack a thousand pounds," she said, a slight uncertainty betraying itself in her voice.

"Lent it. Certainly. But who told you, or why Ulyett's money matters should so excite you, I don't know."

Another short silence. Then Esmé spoke again, a little hesitatingly.

"I heard Jack had stolen that money."

"Did you? Pleasant for Jack!"

"I mean, someone else's money; and you enabled him to replace it. Of course you would not do that for nothing. You must not think I should betray you, Quentin."

"It seems to me that you are betraying Ulyett—if you have any real grounds for your assertions respecting the poor fellow."

"Never mind Jack. He is not likely to come back, unless I send for him. Would you like me to send for him?"

"That is your concern."

"No, it is not; it is yours. It's no use pretending unconsciousness, Quentin. You need Jack's silence, and you have paid him for it. But you cannot tell how long it will last. You are no relative of Jack's. Besides, you owe me reparation, as I have said. If Ralph had lived, I should have married him."

"Ten minutes ago you told me you did not like Ralph."

"I should have married him to please my mother. I have never thought of my own feelings. Dear mother's wishes are sacred to me, and she always wished me to marry a Fleming."

Which statement was an ingenious perversion of Mrs. Rusholme's natural hope that her pet daughter would marry a rich man. Outside among the laurels, Granny muttered vigorous comments in her native Doric. The affected modesty of Esmé's voice, the well-acted faltering and final sigh, all worked up the old woman to a heart-warming pitch of solid exasperation. Scant shrift would Esmé have met at Granny's hands could she — like Abou Hassan—have been absolute ruler for one day. She crept closer to the glass. Fleming was speaking gravely.

"I never bribed Ulyett. I had no reason for doing so. As for reparation, I owe you none. It is mere childishness to

say so. With regard to your mother's wishes, Ralph is gone—and I cannot think you would have been happy with him had he lived. There is a good man who loves you—Travis Crosier, a thoroughly good fellow. He will make you a better husband than my cousin would have done. For myself, if I marry—I do not know that I shall marry — but if I do, my choice is already made."

"You mean Frances Aveland. You cannot marry into any strange family. You must marry to ensure silence. Otherwise I shall not feel under any obligation to keep silence. You cannot bribe me, Quentin, as you did Jack."

Esmé's words were very deliberately uttered, and in the metallic tone which always became more accentuated when she felt particularly vindictive towards the individual she was addressing.

"I am sorry that you take such an

extraordinary view of a very simple act of friendliness. And I am also sorry, Esmé, that this conversation seems to have become the reverse of pleasant to either of us. Let us agree to forget it. Can I take you anywhere? Or do you prefer to be left here. I am afraid I cannot spare any more time from my guests."

"I have no wish to keep you from them, though you appear to forget that I am one. Leave me here. I have no more to say. You have your choice, and you have plenty of time to think over it. If you marry Frances Aveland I shall not consider myself bound to silence."

There was no more said after this.

Granny heard Fleming's footsteps passing out of the conservatory down the passage. A soft April air blew from the moor, a few sleepy birds twittered. The darkness was not the dense horrible darkness of houses built by hands, but a dim

starlit blueness—a sort of owl's noonday, in which trees and shrubs and winding pathway were faintly visible. A quiet friendly darkness—more friendly than any human home and warmer in its kindliness than any human hearth. Indoors may be good—outdoors is generally better. Granny slipped back through the laurels on to the path beyond and thence into the house again. Crossing the passage by the conservatory door, herself in shadow, she saw Esmé standing alone by the palms; and the look on Esmé's face boded ill to Quentin Fleming.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

FLEMING'S guests might have been fairies, so quaint and varied were the vehicles in which they departed, and of shapes utterly unknown elsewhere. Pumpkin-like covered waggons, spider-like gigs, and queer little low cars with a contrivance for supporting a huge umbrella—the whole speeding over the moor like an animated mushroom.

The Avelands had an old-fashioned hooded phaeton, with a fat shaggy brown pony, and an almost equally shaggy coachman and general factotum, called Peter, as thin as the pony was fat. Peter considered

it due to his master's dignity to start off with prodigious dash and rattle. Once fairly outside the Hall gates and out on the moor, old Peter drove at a steady jog-trot that gave the occupants of the phaeton ample time to study the landscape as it drifted past them. To-night it was a weird misty landscape in silver grey with blurred shadows, no sharpness anywhere. A light not clear nor dark; earth and air one soft shimmer of mist and moonlight. The sandhills were more silver than grey, the moor more grey than silver; each and all melting—elusive. It might not have been earth at all, but some dim lunar world whence all realities had vanished, leaving only their ghosts. The silence added to this feeling of illusion — of remoteness. The phaeton wheels made no sound on the sandy peat of the track. Once a curlew screamed. Then the shining mist seemed to close

round again after its severance by the bird's cry—to close into wellnigh absolute stillness; save for a faint tremor hardly to be called a sound—the pulsing of the sea.

"This is Northern magic," said Aveland as he and his daughter were carried softly onward without effort of their own through that eerie landscape, so familiar—so transfigured; "Northern magic," he repeated. "I am no lover of the north myself, yet I recognize its witchery under certain aspects. Such a night makes the Norse faith natural. Anything might take shape and form from this mist. Odin and his ravens—the Valkyrie! You would make a good Valkyria yourself, Frances."

"Should I, father? The moor reminds me of Pierre Loti. It often does."

"You are right. I had not thought of him. Yes, it is the same landscape as the Breton—the same feeling. The bare greyness, the sea-mists, the subtle charm of

mystery and restraint. Odd that the most delicate Ariel-like genius seems to need—firstly, a long line of dour Puritan ancestors; secondly, a chill sea coast for a cradle. I have sometimes thought there is a certain resemblance between the writings of Loti and Hawthorne, with their respective Puritan and Huguenot ancestry. Of course Hawthorne is the stronger, but the likeness is there. The same limpid clearness, though dealing with things mist-like and strange, and coloured with the colours of dark rock and barren sand and luminous air. The same insight, the same tenderness for helpless creatures — this last most marked in Loti. And also, both equally give the impression of restrained force, as does that soft lapping of the tide that we hear. It is only the soft grey tide—and no man can tell what it may do." Aveland paused. There came through the silence a measured beating sound that grew more distinct.

"What is that? A horse?"

Frances leant forward from under the hood as her father spoke, and looked back into the thin silvery haze that seemed to part and close up and follow them; thickening over a stunted oak till the tree seemed clothed with ghostly shimmering foliage; drawing away behind a willow clump till every leafless branch could be seen defined against the pale mist crouching beyond, like an outcast soul—a wavering, moonlit haze, in which a horseman loomed gigantic, all outlines blurred and shifting.

"There is someone riding behind us," said Frances. "Quentin must be too busy to leave the Hall to-night, yet the rider looks like him, and the horse like Marigold. The mist is so confusing that I cannot see clearly."

"Doubtless it is Odin. He is on his way to Heligoland, where his horse will be shod by Master Olaf, the smith."

Though Aveland spoke thus jestingly, his heart gave a bound; so anxious was he—this dying father—to leave his child's future less uncertain. If Fleming, after seeing his guests depart, could take a night ride of fourteen miles, merely for the sake of trotting half that distance beside the Sandhayes phaeton, why, surely—— ?

"It *is* Quentin," said Frances, "and here is Bran!" as the great hound bounded up.

"I hope you have not imagined me a highwayman," said Fleming, checking his horse to a trot beside them. "When I had seen my last guest fairly outside my gates, I felt the need of a little exercise. So I started in pursuit of you."

"Father took you for Odin. It is a great disappointment."

"Is it? I am so sorry!"

"And we are in pursuit of the Patons," Frances continued. "We are supposed to be going home with them. Of course we

shall not overtake them. We never overtake anybody. They are about two miles ahead, and are likely to remain so, as they have borrowed Farmer Blackshaw's mule. How can we, with merely a pony, compete with a mule!"

"Blackshaw's mule! — but why in the world—— ?"

"Oh, their horse is lame, that is why. Did you not see the mule as they drove up? It is a very smart animal—much smarter than our own shaggy friend," with a nod towards the plodding Sandhayes pony.

"Anyone can drive a smart animal," Aveland observed meditatively. "Only a philosopher or a saint would sit behind a cinnamon bear."

"It is a good little beast," said Fleming.

"Thank you, Quentin. When a man makes a statement like that I appreciate the friendship which dictates it."

"Well," rejoined Quentin, laughing, "I was admiring the pony's moral qualities."

"He has the soul of a Bayard," said Frances.

"Therefore the mule is ahead of him," said her father.

"Does it matter?" Frances asked, in the slow, clear tones so like her father's. "Being ahead does not always mean getting the best of things. 'The gods sell their gifts at a fair price.' If one lingers by the way, one has leisure to look round. Bayard is in the right. Let the mule go ahead!"

"That is what I should have said in my youth. Now I feel an unreasonable desire to apply a stick to the mule, merely because it *is* a mule. Curious how one's natural savagery survives!"

"My natural savagery seems in abeyance just now," said Quentin, restraining Marigold's inclination to set off like the wind —for what was the moor made if not to

gallop over? "I wish to linger, to prolong the moment," this more particularly to Frances. "Do you remember that fellow in Browning who thought Heaven might be one long ride at sunset? This moonlight does just as well."

They talked on. Aveland leaning back among his wrappings and listening—hoping—watching the slow eddying of the moon-mist into dim shapes that peopled the moor with phantoms of Briton and Roman, Pict and Dane, whose feet had trodden it long ago. April though it was, the hall at Sandhayes retained its winter cheerfulness, the red firelight warming its whiteness—the dull whiteness of the stone floor, the walls—dark panelled below, white above up to the dark rafters; the two house-friends, Malise and Ptolemy, basking on the white rug before the fire.

"You will come in, Quentin?" Aveland had said. "I know no reason why a man

should welcome his friends only at certain hours. A call paid at one in the morning has at least the merit of escaping monotony."

"I am not sure of that," Fleming replied, entering nevertheless. "I should say that the monotony or otherwise of the visit would depend a good deal on the fellow paying it. However, natural perversity usually impels a man to be more lively after midnight just because he ought to be asleep."

"Why ought?"—Frances took off her cloak and went to a side-table. "Quentin, I think that little kettle is boiling. Please bring it here, I am going to make some coffee. Why should we lose every night? The stormy ones, perhaps; but the starry and the warm ones? I always sympathize with that friend of De Quincey's whom he found sitting in his garden after midnight —not 'sunning,' but 'mooning' himself. Why should we not moon ourselves occasionally?"

"Rheumatism," suggested Aveland, taking his coffee from his daughter's hand, and patting Bran; the dog having come in with his master as a matter of course.

"I do my mooning best on horseback," said Fleming. "A night ride is a capital thing."

How pleasant it all was! The wide white hall with its dark fittings; the singing fire; the basking dogs; the murmur of the sea without; the delicate aroma of coffee, bringing a thought of the hot East into the chill North; the mingled simplicity and culture, characteristic of Sandhayes under the Aveland rule. The pity that it could not last! —that all things, good or bad, drift away towards change; and the best things go the quickest when their foundation is that frailest one, human life. The fair peace of Sandhayes rested on Aveland's life. When he went, the spirit of the homestead must needs

depart also; must become a memory instead of a joy. Many happy memories had Aveland prepared for his child—memories like a string of jewels, each with its own distinct beauty. This day would be one—a happy day from dawn to close.

When Marigold's head was turned homewards, and the silence of sleep settled over Sandhayes, Frances—in her own room—stood for a moment looking into the scarlet depths of the fire that flamed so cheerily in the wide northern grate. Then she drew aside the curtains from the window and threw it open, admitting the damp sweetness of the April night. Without, the moor stretched dimly—whitely, the silvery vapour lying on it; a glimmering veil through which the yet leafless boughs—misshapen by the mist—pointed like fingers downward and onward: downward to the dark pools—in which of them lay the bones of Granny Darlow's husband?—onward to the spot

where Ralph Fleming died. And downward and onward to many a spot where hemlock had grown tall and rank, and blossomed and withered year after year above dead men, if all the grim legends of Wildersmoor were true. If not, whence did they arise? Doubtless they were true.

But when one is young, and one's own life drama is unfolding, one's mind is not greatly occupied with thoughts of bygone generations. The living fill the stage. Frances looked out of her warm, bright room over the dark moorland, feeling a vague soft contentment with everything. This was home. Not merely the house; but the familiar earth around, the familiar sea purring to itself over there in the night—all giving that sense of friendly shelter extended over long years, which belongs only to the first home—the home of one's childhood.

The mist was not so dense as it had been an hour ago. It seemed to be lifting. The moist, warm airs faintly breathing from the sea brought out the characteristic odours of Wildersmoor, the dry, curious scent of dead bracken mingling with the fresh earthliness of springing moss. As the scent rose, incense-like, Frances remembered hearing of a dying sailor, a Wildersmoor man, who—being desperately ill—was sent ashore near Sandhayes, and prayed his bearers to lay him down for a moment by the roadside, saying he "Couldna die easy without a smell o' the moss." Not far away was the patch of emerald velvet that had been his death-bed—a more wonderful couch than any made with hands.

Overhead, a dark rift appeared, a space of deep violet sky, into which sailed a moon of vivid silver, lighting up sea and land. How beautiful it all was! The more beautiful because there was no shadow on the

girl's soul to dim that beauty. She rose from her leaning attitude, listened to the church clock striking slowly—the light wind brought the sound from the village. Marigold and his master would be home by this. Frances closed the window with a smile on her face, drew the heavy curtains, and turned with a little shiver from the mystery and glory without to the warmth of the dancing fire, that babbled neither of death nor of change, but only of the fair commonplaces of home.

## CHAPTER XXV.

But nothing happened as yet. May passed with its sheets of blue hyacinth in the copses, and on the moor the moss grew and embroidered itself with tiny white and yellow blossoms; and satin-flowers and rose-a-rubies shot up to keep the tall ferns company—soon to be overshadowed by them. By the brown pools, hemlock spread its leaves—there was much hemlock on Wildersmoor; while from every thicket and bush, from willow and hazel and stunted oak, those feather-clad spirits we call birds, sang matins and evensong

with lusty throats and joyous hearts, so happy were they—so unmolested. There were never many people needing to cross the moor, and the most of these kept to the main tracks. Only Granny Darlow and Blind John wandered along bypaths, and women are seldom scourges to any but their own kind. Granny was as harmless to the winged and four-footed natives as though she were disembodied; and, as for John, the creatures knew well they had no need to flee in terror from a blind man. What a new era of happiness would dawn for our poor fellow-spirits, were the whole human race stricken blind. They have no foes so dire as we.

But the returning summer brought no return of health to Aveland. He had rapidly become worse. By the middle of June he rarely went further than his own garden. From the porch to the clipped yews and back again, was now his customary

walk. Sometimes not even that. Day by day he grew more fragile-looking, more transparent; and day by day the troubled shadow deepened on his daughter's face. She could not disguise from herself how swift was his journeying away from this familiar earth. Fleming perpetually sent over from the Hall everything he could imagine that would tempt a failing appetite, and followed himself; but then he could hardly appear at Sandhayes more often than he had been in the habit of doing. McKie was constantly stepping out of the train at North Rode, or driving over with Quentin; not that any check could be put on the ebbing life, but McKie's attachment to Aveland drew him—though uselessly. Nina Paton came from the Vicarage with a smiling face, and laughed and chattered. Then went home and wept, exclaiming against the perversity of things.

"Dr. Aveland is the one adorable man

I have ever seen," she said, with a sob and a sniff. "Excuse my saying this, Cyril. And to think that he should go when so many worthless ones cumber the earth!"

"We must resign ourselves," said Paton, thoughtfully. He was really sorry about Aveland.

"Don't say that, Cyril, please. People always say that to anyone who is troubled in heart, and I call it taking a mean advantage of one's sorrowful and therefore defenceless condition. Just say it to a man who has tipped off his bicycle into a ditch, and see what he will reply!"

The Vicar gazed reflectively out of the window at the post-office and Crosier's lodgings. He was not paying much attention to his wife's remarks.

"Aveland is a little difficult to approach," he observed presently, "I mean in serious matters. I have been at Sandhayes pretty often lately, but have had no opportunity of

speaking to him on other than everyday topics."

"Do you think he needs speaking to? He sees you constantly. If he wishes for any spiritual advice he will surely ask for it."

"True," Paton spoke a little reluctantly. Then he added more briskly, "I may as well go there now. Probably I shall find Aveland alone. Fleming generally turns up about six, doesn't he?"

"Sometimes earlier. It depends on whether he is staying to dinner or not."

"Anyway, I'll go down now. I meant to have looked in yesterday, but Crosier's absence kept me busy. They are alone, are they not?"

"They were when I left, an hour ago."

June on Wildersmoor had not the riotous summer heat and luxuriance of more southern places. There was a sort of repression about it. The sunshine was a softened

gold, the pale blue of the sky had a faint haze in it. The spring green was darkening, though here and there the cuckoo lingered.

There was one calling in the larch wood at the back of Sandhayes, as the Vicar turned in at the gates between the clipped yews. There seemed to be a hush about the place—a hush not of peace, but of expectancy.

Dr. Aveland was lying in an easy-chair in the dining-room, by the window looking out on the moor. Quentin Fleming usually came that way, and in these last days Aveland's thoughts dwelt on him more than ever.

"Is your father well enough to see me, or do we give you too much of us?" asked Paton, when Frances met him in the hall.

She answered the latter part of his remark first.

"You know we are always glad to see either or both of you. Nina told us you

might possibly appear later. Father, here is Mr. Paton."

"Tell me all the news of the village, Paton," said Aveland, as his visitor entered. "There is something peculiarly soothing in village news. Which man has grown the biggest lettuce or the most alluring cabbage? Whose children have let the family pig into their neighbour's garden? And with what results? It is the best possible news for a sick man—unless the villagers are his tenants."

"I don't know that there is much civil war going on at present," rejoined the Vicar. "We have settled the little difficulty between the Brierleys; I daresay you heard that from my wife."

The conversation drifted on from one subject to another. By-and-by Frances left the two together. Her father seemed well amused, and the little larch wood behind the house was full of cool air and summer

sun. In these days Frances did not wander about the moor as she used to do. The last weeks of Aveland's life were too precious to his daughter to be spent away from him. Now and then, when a friend was with him, she would go into the wood, striving to gain strength and calmness from sunlight and sea wind—from strong-growing trees and happy living things. Sitting on a rustic bench in the chequered light and shadow, Frances thought much and deeply, being confronted by that which quickest cowes and kills—the sense of powerlessness. Meanwhile, in the dining-room, conversation had taken a graver turn, and an opportunity had been given Paton to observe that if he "could be of any service in his priestly capacity——"

"Thank you, no." Aveland's eyes rested on his companion with a quiet smiling light in their depths. "For the one thing that troubles me—the leaving my only child

—you could not give me consolation. For the rest, I need no consolation—I am glad to go. I have no sins to confess. I have never repented of anything, save of my amiable impulses—those pearls of conciliation that I have cast before swine. Content yourself, Paton, I die in the faith of the Trinity—the oldest faith in the world; the original ancient faith, of which all other forms of religion are offshoots. In Asia—in India, you can see its traces in the old, old books, in the present habits and beliefs of the people. Why does the Indian woman wash out her water-jar in three jerks? There was the faith of the Trinity in old Egypt, almost lost—as in India—among fantastic star-worship and tutelary gods, so corrupted that Moses saw no way out of the maze of idolatry but by teaching the Trinity in its unity—as the one God Jehovah; precisely as Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees and rejected all save the One

God, both of them acting—as you and I believe—under Divine guidance. The restoration of the ancient faith in its fulness was too great a task for man ; it needed the Second Person of the Trinity. Not till Christ appeared was the old faith taught once more in its purity."

"I am willing to admit," said Paton, dubiously, "that the ancient nations may have had some dim illumination ; yet I can hardly go as far as you. For instance, Mahomedanism is no offshoot of the true faith of the Trinity."

"I think it is. It was a revolt of the human mind against the corruptions that had crept into the Trinitarian belief—a revolt similar to that of Moses. Mahomed looked round at the multitude of gods—many of them were blocks of meteoric stone, like the Kaaba at Mecca—and turned for relief to the Unity of the Trinity—the one God, whom he called Allah, and whom

Moses called Jehovah. But the Arab camel-driver was not a man of either the natural powers or the education of Moses—whom, by the way, he doubtless imitated. Neither had he any especial command from the Almighty. Consequently, he grafted a lot of fantastic lies on to his real and true idea of the one God. But I believe the man to have been sincere, as far as his capacity went. Afterwards his success did its usual work, and he bequeathed war and misery —and that deliberately—instead of peace and conciliation. Nowadays we are witnessing the same falling away from the faith and the same results—a drifting to monotheism on the one hand and to superstitious beliefs and multitudinous gods on the other; to Buddhism, to Theosophy, to a hankering after the classic gods. I should not be in the least surprised to hear of a revival of the cult of Isis or Dionysus. But this is more your affair than mine,

Paton. I am passing away from it all. Rest assured there is nothing new under the sun. The brutalities of science, its so-called discoveries—all are old forms of cruelty, old theories, old inventions. Nothing is new save railways. Those we moderns have truly invented. All else is old. Every modern form of thought has been anticipated, every phase of belief and disbelief has been experienced long—long ago. For me, content yourself; I die in the oldest faith in the world—the faith of the Three that, later, took its clearest form in Christ—and these Three are One."

Paton did not immediately reply. He didn't exactly know what to say. These just persons who need no repentance, whose belief is clear and unassailable, whose ingrain independence of spirit compels them to get over the gates themselves, instead of waiting for an orthodox introduction to St. Peter, are eminently trying to the

professional mind. We all know there is more joy in heaven over a repentant sinner, and undoubtedly there is also much more satisfaction upon earth. Paton felt a very natural annoyance; and Aveland—a man of keen intuition—perfectly understood the Vicar's frame of mind, and derived therefrom much internal amusement.

"Though I do not need your teaching," he resumed after a minute's silence, "I have not said that I do not need your friendship."

The Vicar's slight ill-humour vanished at these words, and he clasped the transparent hand held out to him.

"If I can do anything——"

"For me, no. But I am leaving my child. If, when I am gone, she should at any time need a friend?"

"I shall be only too happy to be of assistance. My wife, you know, is devoted to your daughter."

"Yes. I do not know a woman in whom I have greater faith than in Mrs. Paton. I am sure her friendship will not change. But I should like to hedge Frances about with friends—if I could."

There was a touch of hopelessness in Aveland's voice. No one knew better than he the terrible uncertainty of all things in this transitory life. Paton opened his mouth to make fresh assurances—very honest assurances too, when Fleming came in. Aveland's face brightened at the sight of him.

"I did not hear your horse, Quentin?"

"I came by train, as I had to see a man in Riverton. How are you, Paton? Is Mrs. Paton here?"

"No, she is at home, where I ought to be," said the Vicar, rising.

"Till to-morrow then?" said Aveland, inquiringly.

"I will come to-morrow," replied Paton. "What time suits you best?"

"Any time after one. We are expecting McKie in the evening."

The Vicar made a wry face. He did not in the least intend to do so, but the face was made before his sense of propriety awoke and controlled the muscles. Fleming saw the grimace and laughed.

"You would like McKie if you knew him better."

"Oh, I fully admit Dr. McKie's many fine qualities. Perhaps I might admire his 'swashing blows' more if they did not so often fall on us poor maligned parsons."

"I'll tell him so. I've been trying to cool him down as to the Church—sprinkle him with holy water as it were—for the last ten years. But his Presbyterianism fizzes up worse than ever."

"He is a free lance," murmured Aveland, "and the worst of it is, he is generally right!"

But it is doubtful whether the Vicar heard these last words.

In the larch wood Frances still sat thinking of many things, and Malise lay at her feet and pricked his ears at the moving shadows. Presently the little dog sprang up with a welcoming bark and much tail-wagging. Fleming was coming through the chequered light and shade, the sunshine behind him lighting up his uncovered head. Truly he was goodly to look upon, and Frances Aveland thought so as she watched his approach.

"I did not know you were here," she said. "Have you seen father? Mr. Paton is with him. I knew the Vicar would feel happier if I were not glowering at him, so I retired hither."

"What is his latest atrocity?"

"Mr. Paton's? Nothing. We have been the best of friends for quite six weeks. I should really like him immensely if he did not expect me to defer to his opinions when I expect him to defer to

mine. In short, the perpetual rock ahead of us is that he wants me to minister to his vanity, whereas I want him to minister to mine. You perceive it is the usual whine of human nature. But he has not ruffled my vanity lately, or I should have set you to worry him."

"I am always ready to act as bulldog. Now am I not?"

He was leaning forward as he sat at the other end of the rustic bench, lazily pulling his moustache, his right elbow resting on his knee. As he spoke, he turned and met Frances' eyes with a glance so smiling, radiant, yet humbly questioning, that the answering colour flashed into her face. There was a momentary silence. A light sea-breeze whispered in the trees overhead, a thrush was singing in an old hawthorn near the house, the warm sun drew out the resinous scent of the pines. The little terrier, sleeping on the mossy

ground, his tail touching the tip of his mistress' shoe and his nose the side of Fleming's boot, hunted rabbits in his dreams and whined impatiently. Quentin was about to speak — checked himself, stooped and patted Malise. Then Frances said:

"Have you seen Dr. McKie to-day? What does he say of father?"

Fleming seemed to pull himself together. It was with an evident effort that he replied:

"I met him at Woffendale station this morning. He did not appear to think Dr. Aveland any worse," meeting her gaze again and speaking cheerily. "McKie doesn't consider it necessary to come twice a day, you know."

"Not necessary, because useless. Is it not so? I think you are evading my question."

"I am. I beg your pardon. Evasion is miserable meanness at the best. Would

you like some other opinion? I will send for any doctor—for all the doctors in London if you wish. I could get three or four down to-morrow if you will tell me whom you would like."

This reckless offer brought a smile to the delicately-curved lips.

"Thank you. You are very good. But it would be of no use."

"Do you think I would not do it? Try me."

"I am sure you would. I only meant that father would not wish to see them."

She paused a moment, thinking how powerful, and yet how powerless, was money. With Quentin aiding, she could summon to Sandhayes every healing agent known to civilization; and what then? Money had but the limited power of the Genie of the Ring in the Eastern story. He could bring much, bestow much; yet the restoration of the Fairy Palace was

beyond his capacity. All the wealth of the young man beside her was hers to command, but the earthly dwelling of her father's soul was crumbling day by day, and the Genie who only commanded gold could not stay its falling walls.

Gold might have stayed them sooner, though. Like most good things, the Genie came too late. There is always food to be had when the starving man is past eating; always warmth when the chill of death is on the body; always peace when the spirit no longer needs it.

"If father were not himself a doctor," Frances went on, "he might perhaps wish to hear other opinions. But he has his own opinions, you see."

"Still, if it would be any comfort to you?"

She shook her head.

"I don't think it would, thank you. I believe too much in father and Dr. McKie to take comfort from any stranger's ideas."

"I think he is better to-day," said Quentin.

"Do you? I fancied so myself. But the improvement never lasts."

She rose to her feet, and the little terrier rose also with a prodigious yawn, glancing from one to the other to ascertain their intentions. Were they going together?

"Must we go in? This is one of the oases we talked about on the moor. Let us stay in it."

He looked up at her as he still sat on the bench, and Frances saw in his face that mingling of conflicting feeling — of some thought restraining speech, that had now and again puzzled her during the last few months.

"If father were not walking in the desert," she replied gravely. "Besides," with a quick change of manner and a little laugh, "I am sure it is dinner-time. Everything gives way to dinner."

"Everything!" acquiesced Fleming, getting up. "Scott was wrong when he made love the ruler of the world. It isn't. It's dinner. No matter what a civilized man may be doing, he obeys the dinner summons. The only free soul is the artist. He makes dinner wait; thereby proving the divinity of Art. Even the Church respects the dinner hour and arranges its services accordingly."

Frances laughed.

"The Church is not respecting the dinner hour to-day. I know the Patons dine earlier than we do."

"Oh, Paton went home ten minutes ago. I saw him off the premises."

"Then father is alone!" Frances quickened her steps.

"Dr. Aveland said he wished to write one or two letters before dinner," explained Fleming.

Perhaps Aveland had wished to give the

young man that brief interview in the fir wood. He was not writing when they joined him, but was idly turning over the leaves of a book. As they came in he looked up with a faint inquiry—a hope in his eyes—a hope that died almost instantly, leaving a vague trouble. The sands of his life were running so swiftly; and Quentin had not spoken.

END OF VOL. II.

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